

**Rabbi Beth Kalisch**  
**Eulogy for Cantor Lilia Kazansky z"tl**  
**April 2, 2017**

We are here today to mourn the death of our remarkable Cantor Emerita, Cantor Lilia Kazansky.

We are here to mourn for the beloved wife of Boris; the beloved mother of Miriam and Becky; beloved mother-in-law of Robert, and beloved of Misha; beloved grandmother of Jordan and Noah; beloved daughter of Clara and David of blessed memory; beloved sister of Marina, of blessed memory; beloved sweet singer of Israel and spiritual guide to this congregation for 31 years.

It feels so impossible that we are here today. I suppose that in some sense, I knew I would have to be here one day, but I never imagined it would be so soon. Cantor Lilia walked with so many of you through many of life's most difficult moments, and so today, we honor her by walking with each other through this most difficult day for our community.

At the Shabbat service celebrating her retirement, I asked people in the room to stand up to signify the ways that they had been touched by Cantor Lilia. Some of you stood up to show that she had stood under the chuppah with you; some of you stood up to show that she had been at your bedside when you were sick, or held your hand at the funeral of a loved one. Some of you stood up to show that she had blessed your baby, or taught your child, or celebrated when your little one stood and chanted Torah for the first time, suddenly an adult in the eyes of God. Some of you stood up to show that she had lifted your soul with her voice, that she had helped you find a way into those Gates of Prayer that so often seem shut. Eventually, the whole room was standing.

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Cantor Lilia Kazansky was born in Moscow to Clara and David, the younger of two daughters. Clara and David were both highly trained engineers, although Clara worked as a homemaker. They lived in a Soviet-style apartment that they shared with another family. The family had one living room, most of which was taken up

by the enormous grand piano that Clara and David had spent all of their money on when Lilia's older sister, Marina, was discovered to be a musical prodigy.

By age 4, young Lilia was following in her older sister's footsteps playing the piano. When her mother took her daughters on vacation to the Black Sea, Clara would find a piano so that the girls could practice even while on vacation. For kindergarten, little Lilia applied and was accepted to a school for musically gifted children. She received an unparalleled music education that was also brutally competitive. By kindergarten, she was already practicing 4 - 5 hours per day, and soon it would be more than that. Her instrument was the piano, but she was also a soloist with the school's choir.

Growing up in Soviet Russia, Lilia was raised with a strong Jewish identity and a love of Yiddish culture, but religion was forbidden under Communism. Everything religious had to be secretive – when it was time for Seder, they could only whisper about it, and no one could teach Hebrew. Both of Lilia's grandfathers had been cantors, and as a young girl, Lilia had seen photos of her father's father in his traditional cantor's regalia, the robe and hat. But Lilia's father had a prestigious job as an engineer that required membership in the Community Party, and her parents worried that if anyone saw the photos and realized that David came from a religious family, he would lose his job. They burned the photos before anyone could find them.

Lilia graduated from high school in 1967, and then applied to conservatory. It was the worst possible year to be applying as a Jew: Russian anti-Semitism was at an all-time high following Israel's victory in the Six-Day War, and anti-Semitic college faculties tried to prevent Jews from enrolling. But despite the attempts of several professors, Lilia played piano so well that she was accepted to the prestigious Moscow State Conservatory, where she would earn her Master's Degree *cum laude*. It was a rich musical environment; Moscow in those days had 12 full-time symphony orchestras, and several conservatories. Lilia was part of a close-knit group of friends who were all Jewish conservatory students. One of her friends was a young opera singer with strong political views against the Soviet government, and although Lilia had many male admirers, this friend was the boldest. His name was Boris Kazansky. Boris thought Lilia was beautiful and sweet, and he knew he was in love with her after just a few months of dating her. They started to play concerts together, with Boris singing and Lilia playing piano.

“I started to get a sense of her strong will then,” Boris explained, as they would argue over musical interpretations. But if Lilia complimented him on something, then he knew he had really done well – her praise was never empty. When he introduced her to his mother, she asked him, “What are you waiting for?!” They were married soon after, and they had a daughter, Miriam.

It wasn't long after Miriam's birth that they realized they needed to leave Moscow. Boris, the more politically outspoken of the two, had been warned on the street that his phone was bugged, as some of his friends were revealed to be informants. Lilia agreed with him: it was time to leave. They went to the KGB office to register their intention to emigrate, which involved renouncing their Soviet citizenship, giving up their jobs, and presenting fake letters from so-called relatives in Israel. Even after that, it took three years before they were allowed to leave – one of the most difficult times during their life. Eventually, they were released to Vienna, then to Rome for several months, and finally, they were allowed to leave. Initially, they planned to go to Israel, but a friend who had recently moved there told them to look elsewhere. Boris and Lilia were too late, he explained; too many other Russian Jewish musicians had already come to Israel and taken all of the jobs. And so they made their way to New York City.

The first years in New York were exhilarating but hard, since they hadn't been able to bring anything with them from Moscow. Years later, they looked back and realized how terrible the culture shock had been, but for the first five years, it was as if they were just running on adrenaline. They were determined to survive, ready to do anything, as long as they could be free. A Jewish immigration agency helped Boris continue to study opera, but even when Lilia won admission to Julliard, the Jewish group sponsoring them refused to help her find funding to pay tuition. Their policies specified that one musician per family was enough, so they encouraged her to enroll in secretarial school instead. If your hands are good for playing the piano, they told her, perhaps they will also be good at typing! Lilia taught piano lessons instead. One family that she taught, a pastor's family of Cuban immigrants, began bringing them canned food and other provisions to help them through those difficult first years as immigrants.

Boris had always imagined that he would become a cantor following his opera career, and soon he enrolled at the Hebrew Union College, the Reform Movement's seminary. During his first year, he won a prestigious internship at

Rodeph Shalom Congregation in Philadelphia. But there was one problem: he had already accepted a High Holy Day position in New Jersey. What to do? Perhaps, Boris gently suggested to Lilia, she could simply learn the High Holy Day repertoire, and serve as the cantor for the New Jersey congregation. Lilia looked at him with wide eyes – what was he suggesting? But soon enough, 5 year old Miriam was teaching her mother the Hebrew she was learning in her Jewish preschool, and Lilia was singing her first High Holy Days. The congregation adored her. The next year, she too had enrolled as a cantorial student at HUC.

Lilia's time at HUC was in some ways a struggle. Musically, she was far ahead of her classmates, but she had much less exposure to Hebrew, liturgy, and other areas of study. Always setting impossible standards for herself just as she did for others, she often felt inadequate in cantorial school. She would study until 2:00 in the morning, wake up at 5:00 to study again, and still, she wasn't satisfied with herself. She cried to Boris at night. "I can't go back," she sobbed to him one day as they sat near the campus in Washington Square Park. But she did go back – eventually even graduating with better grades than Boris.

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A year before Lilia was ready to graduate and be ordained as a cantor, a position opened up close to Boris' pulpit in Philadelphia. It was a job at a smaller congregation, called Beth David, which at that time was still in the Wynnefield neighborhood of West Philadelphia. A few graduating students came to audition, but the committee wasn't interested in them. Finally, one of the students who had been rejected convinced Lilia that she should audition for the opening at Beth David.

When I first came to Beth David, I remember hearing from Henry Wolpert, a member of this congregation until his death a few years ago, about his experience serving on the Cantor Search Committee that hired Lilia back in 1984. "When I was asked to be on the search committee, I thought: What did I know about picking a cantor? Oh, but then we heard her sing," he recalled with a smile, "and I knew that Lilia would be our next cantor."

It was not the safe choice, this young Russian mother. Miriam was still a little girl, and Becky was on the way soon. There were talented men who had applied for

the position, and female cantors were a new phenomenon. It was still less than a decade since the first female cantor had been ordained.

Lilia arrived at the train station, and Rabbi Henry Cohen was there to pick her up. But as he started to pick up her suitcase, the young cantorial candidate took umbrage, and grabbed the suitcase back from him. “We Russians carry our own suitcases!” she declared. Thus began a 31 year relationship between a congregation and a cantor who always insisted on doing things her own way. From the beginning, it always seemed to be *bashert*, meant to be. She would spend her entire career here.

Lilia worked with Rabbi Cohen for 9 years, a strong and natural partnership. Lilia brought new music to the congregation, and Rabbi Cohen taught the congregation to accept and relish all the new tunes and styles of music. She knew how to gently tease him, singing a Yiddish song about a rebbe dancing, when the last thing anyone expected to see Rabbi Cohen do was dance. He was outspoken about the plight of Soviet Jewry, and together, they worked to help free Lilia’s parents and bring them to Philadelphia. They brought a full busload of Beth David members to march on Washington for Soviet Jews. Lilia was fearless as always, devoted to getting her parents out. Eventually, when it seemed that nobody was paying attention, and that petty politics might prevent her parents from winning their freedom, she went to Russia herself – a dangerous trip because she didn’t yet have American citizenship, and she could have been put in jail in Russia. She made the trip with a reporter from the Philadelphia Inquirer, whose article helped raise her parents’ profile as refuseniks. Eventually, with some help from an American talk show host, Lilia’s parents got the last two spots in a group of 50 refuseniks granted passage to America, and Lilia settled them in Philadelphia.

Following Rabbi Cohen’s retirement, Cantor Lilia brought stability to this congregation over the next two decades over the course of several rabbinic transitions. She worked with Rabbi Bob Rosenberg, Rabbi Andy Busch, Rabbi Jim Egolf, and finally, with me, leading Beth David through decades of changes in Jewish and communal life.

She raised more than a generation of bar and bat mitzvah students who learned to pronounce Hebrew with a Russian accent. She was a famously tough b’nai mitzvah teacher, who never accepted anything but the best from her students,

and like the toughest of Russian teachers and coaches, had a way of breaking her students down before building them up stronger than they ever imagined they could be. Sometimes parents complained during the preparations when their children were struggling with Lilia's high standards, but no parents ever complained after watching their son or daughter shine with pride and accomplishment on the bima. She officiated at somewhere close to 800 or 900 b'nai mitzvah over the course of her 31 years at Beth David.

"Please join me," she would say in her distinctive Russian accent, and the congregation learned to sing along, whether to Carlebach or to Ladino or Yiddish. She built a volunteer choir that became its own community at Beth David, singing at Friday night services before family b'nai mitzvah, and inspiring several members of the choir to sing in settings beyond Beth David, too. As a fundraiser for Beth David, she auctioned off a Russian dinner for a dozen people at her home, and not only was the dinner the hot item of the auction, but she finally agreed to hold two dinners, so that twice as many people could attend. She had a delightfully silly side that came out on various occasions, like when she played the melodica, a kind of piano harmonica, in a Purim parody of the Lion King that she wrote (although many suspected that she didn't really know the Lion King very well), or more recently while wearing a Beatles wig and a mustache. She led a trip to Israel, where she floated in the Dead Sea and famously got kicked off a camel.

Although she may have been raised in Communist Russia to see Judaism as merely cultural, Lilia had a deep spiritual presence, and the soul of a mystic. Her voice did not sing the prayers; her voice was prayer itself. It lifted people up and transported them; it filled up this sanctuary and filled up the empty places in the souls that prayed here, and left them a little more whole. "It was as if she rolled out a ladder for us so we could join her in the heavens," one member described to me, "I always felt that I was transported to a spiritual plane I could find no way other than through her music." She had a symphonic sense when it came to designing services, an intuitive sense for the flow, and she used both traditional modes of Jewish prayer, as well as new spiritual practices. She brought meditative services to Beth David, with chanting, silence, and contemplation. During a congregational retreat, she locked a group of adults in a room, turned out the lights, and created a mystical experience – some giggled, some were transformed, but none would ever forget it. She served as a kind of spiritual director to Beth David members, encouraging them to explore their spiritual questions and

validating their experiences. During the hardest challenges of her life, she told her congregation: God is testing us, but we will pass the test.

Lilia may have entered the cantorate through music, but in some ways, her cantor's soul was in pastoral care. She sang at the bedside of men and women as they lay dying, or as they recovered. She would show up at the hospital unexpected after a surgery. She would plant herself down in your dining room during shiva, as if she had known you for years and years, taking a bagel and looking you right in the eyes. She would visit and know just what to say. She would call, even when there was nothing to say. She brought comfort to so many Beth David families over the years, through so many difficult times. Several of you have reached out to me to tell you how Lilia brought you strength and comfort when you were coping with the suicide of someone you loved. God's love came through her voice and her eyes.

I was the last rabbi to share the bima with Lilia, and in many ways, I think it was through Lilia's blessing that I came to find my home here. Certainly, Lilia's relationships with other rabbis were not always easy, and I saw glimpses of the stubborn strength that anyone who worked with Lilia was familiar with. But from the beginning of my time here as the Interim Rabbi, Lilia was clear with me that she hoped I could stay. I tried to explain to her that my staying wasn't even in the realm of possibility – that the very nature of being the interim rabbi meant that I would only be here for the year, that there were very strict rules that prevented me from even thinking about staying – but even as I laughed at her persistence, she would not be swayed. In the end, of course, she knew more than I did. For my part, I will always be grateful for the large and small things Lilia did to help make Beth David my home, including encouraging me to sing with her on the bima, even teaching me harmonies we could sing together, and letting me into the circle of those who benefited from her care. Every rabbi needs a rabbi, and Lilia was always quick to spot the moments when I needed her care and attention, sometimes even before I did. She would step into my office, close my door, and grasp hold of both of my arms while she looked me straight in the eyes and spoke to me. She blessed Larry and me at the aufruf before our wedding, singing a prayer from Fiddler on the Roof with new lyrics she wrote herself, reminding us to be our “best Beth and best Larry.” I was so moved when she told me how I reminded her of herself when she was a young cantor – not just because we were both always running late and getting lost - and I will always carry with me the

blessing she gave me by trusting me to take care of the people and lead the congregation she had loved for so many years into the next generation.

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While our congregation may have known the public cantor side of Lilia best, her family saw other sides of Lilia: a wife, a mother, a sister, a daughter, a grandmother.

For Boris, she was the yin to his yang. Where Boris was calm, Lilia might explode. Where Boris would listen and take things in, Lilia was all action, looking to solve problems and find solutions. Where Boris would internalize things, Lilia would externalize them. If Boris was like the element of water, or maybe slow lava, Lilia was like fire: passion, expression, energy. Thanks to Lilia, theirs was never a boring marriage. She was spontaneous, unpredictable: he never knew exactly what he was going to get, and many times Lilia took him by surprise. Together, they found deep spirituality in nature, especially the beautiful woods surrounding their home in Wyncote. On the stage or on the bima together, they knew each other's voices so well, they knew how to create something very powerful. They sang together from California to Chicago, from Germany to Canada, from Detroit to Shreveport. When Boris was sick, and doctors didn't think they could help him, she helped him find an alternative therapy that saved his life. They were together almost 50 years.

For her daughters, Miriam and Becky, Lilia's affection was fierce and protective, like a mother bear. She wanted the best for them, making sure they knew that no resource would be spared to get them experiences like camps, travel, private colleges. She schlepped them to Beth David to sing and play during services, taking particular delight in their musical talents, even when her own interest outlasted her daughters'. She was so proud of them, pushing them harder and harder, enforcing the highest of expectations, and kvelling in their accomplishments. Like so many Jewish mothers, she could be overly opinionated and overly involved. She raised her daughters to be strong and independent – and that they became. As a mother, she was stubborn, strong, and fierce; passionate and full of energy; loving, protective, and possessive. When she became a granddaughter to Miriam's sons Jordan and Noah, her pride and joy was doubled.



During the year, having two cantors for parents meant that life was busy. It was hard to have Shabbat dinner when both Lilia and Boris had responsibilities at synagogue; it was hard to relax on the Jewish holidays when there were so many rehearsals and last-minute crises. A special joy, therefore, were their family vacations, when Lilia could finally leave the stress of the synagogue behind her and relax. She and Boris wanted to show their daughters the world, and Lilia loved new experiences. The first priority was to be as close to the water as possible. Whether they went South to those bare cabanas right on the beach in Puerto Rico, or north to Bar Harbor, Maine, Lilia would swim. No matter the weather or the temperature of the water; no matter whether anyone else was in the water, Lilia would be. Not just wading, not just splashing, but all in, swimming, moving her body through the water.

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It's still true to say it: Lilia was a survivor. She survived so much in a hard life with many disappointments and challenges. She survived by sheer force of personality. She survived by struggling to be true to herself, to believe in herself, to find her center. She survived by laughing. She survived by learning to forgive. She survived by surrounding herself by beauty, by prayer and by nature and by music and by God. She survived by living a life of joy and passion.

Our hearts are broken today because Lilia finally faced a challenge she couldn't survive, a pain she couldn't turn to joy, a narrow place from which she couldn't escape. We all wish we had known. We all wish we had been able to help. We all wish we had been able to bring her close when she felt she needed to push us away. We all wish we could have changed this devastating coda to the story of her remarkable life.

But the end of a life, no matter how shocking, does not negate or alter the earlier chapters. They were true, they were real, and her strength and her spirit shine as magnificently today in memory as they did in life.

It's important to emphasize that there is no sin today, and there is no guilt today. There are only tears, there is only grief and sorrow and yes, shock and anger and confusion, for what might have been and what has instead been lost.

How did we end up here today, and how could this have happened? We know from scientific studies that suicide is enormously complicated. Although it is only human to sift through the memories in search of answers, there is likely no real answer to be found. There is almost never a single cause of suicide; it is the rare tragic result of a layered combination of life events, neurological and psychological illness.

How we wish we could have known; how we wish we could have changed the end of her story; how we wish we could have brought her back to Beth David in health and in joy, in full Lilia spirit.

But in truth, Lilia's story did not end on Tuesday, and it does not end this week. The story of this beloved wife and mother and grandmother continues to unfold in the lives she touched and the family she built. The story of our beloved Cantor Emerita continues to unfold in the life of this congregation that was her home, and in the music of the Jewish people that was her life's work. Her voice will be heard in the halls of this synagogue and in the hearts of those who prayed with her and those who loved her.

Heaven's choir, perhaps, has gained an exquisite soloist. But here on earth, blessed as we have been – for now, we are bereft.