



JOSEPH MALOVANY

pray it forward

BY ALIZA DAVDOVIT

His is the voice that blesses the crying new-born child; that ushers the departed to their eternal rest; that sanctifies the lovely bride and anxious groom; and that rises boldly before the Almighty beseeching for mercy to heal the sick and to forgive the sinner. Throughout his life, his is the voice that has accompanied his people as a maternal hug through all the seasons of life.

His job description—“Talking to God on a daily basis”—for certain is not one commonly found on Monster.com. But world famous cantor Joseph Malovany, of New York’s affluent Fifth Avenue Synagogue, has been engaging his maker in a musical dialogue since he was 7 years old. With his dramatic soulful prayers, the podium shakes and the synagogue’s walls literally vibrate.

But Malovany is hardly talking to the walls. The lyrical quality and emotive power of his voice pierces hearts, bringing congregants to tears and audiences to their feet. His deeply expressive sound, which emanates more from his essence than from his lips, fills the sanctuary with awesome splendor. When he sings, the air becomes denser, more serious, as if a heavenly presence has enveloped the room—and perhaps It has. How fitting that Malovany’s own

birthday falls on Yom Kippur, the day he works hardest to defend the stiff-necked tribe known as God's chosen people.

Despite his vocal ability, Malovany has, on numerous occasions, turned down invitations to sing major operatic roles. "God gave me the gift of a voice and I will use that voice to serve Him," he insists. "I want to show the beauty of Judaism through its music to the entire world." And he is indeed ensuring the longevity of that beauty as a Distinguished Professor of Liturgical Music at the Philip and Sarah Belz School of Jewish Music of Yeshiva University, where he was voted the most popular professor. There, he passes on the age-old traditions to a new generation of musical advocates for the Jewish people.

Malovany is also dean of the Moscow Academy of Jewish Music, an academy he helped establish in 1989 in conjunction with the American Jewish Joint Distribution

St. Petersburg, Estonia, Lithuania, and Belarus. "All the music that initially came from Eastern Europe, I've given back to them," Malovany says. With his "God-given gift" he is committed to "pray" it forward.

Malovany's "gift" has also echoed beyond the classroom and synagogue. Keeping in good company, or good accompaniment for that matter, this recorded artist has performed oratorios and symphonic works and toured extensively throughout the world with many prestigious international orches-

Opera House, New York's Lincoln Center, the Herodion Amphitheater near Bethlehem, and the opera house of Santander, Spain. This frequent flyer could leave our readers jetlagged with the long list of stages he's touched down upon around the globe.

The tall, handsome *chazzan*, who himself has a regal comportment, has performed for kings and queens and even received a fan letter from the Queen of England. He has sung before every Israeli prime minister since Golda Meir and performed at Menachem



Photo courtesy of Joseph Malovany

Malovany with former Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Begin's 65th birthday party in the former prime minister's home. From Putin to Clinton, he has met countless heads of state and world leaders—not only to sing for them but to speak to them about matters affecting Jews and the Jewish State. From the Capitol Rotunda in Washington, D.C., to the Knesset in Jerusalem, his voice has been heard. (Before the Knesset, he performed his original composition in which he set, for

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Committee. He deems it the highlight of his career. "My encounter with Russian Jews was deeply emotional, much more than one can imagine," he says. "I have given myself to the Jews of Eastern Europe because I wanted to give them what they were deprived of for so long." Today, 20 years later, young cantors are traveling all over Russia conducting services in different communities from Moscow, Tashkent,

tras, including the Israel Philharmonic, the Russian State Symphony, the Mexico Symphony, the London Classical, the New York Symphony, the São Paulo Symphony, and the Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra, just to list a few.

From humble podiums to grand concert halls, Malovany's name will not soon be forgotten. He has graced such diverse venues as Amsterdam's Royal

the first time ever, the text of Israel's Declaration of Independence to music.)



Heeding the words of his beloved mother, Freyda, which were echoed years later by the Lubavitcher *Rebbe*, Malovany was advised to sing everywhere he could around the world, whether he got paid or not. He has traveled all over the former Soviet

Union, as well as to Poland, Hungary, and Romania, never taking a penny. In Leningrad, he performed the first cantorial concert since the Bolshevik Revolution. There is hardly a Jewish community in the world that he hasn't visited and affected by his presence and participation in advancing and preserving Jewish life. And even though he aims high, he will still get down low to fulfill his commitments, even below sea level. He was the first person ever to bless a Torah at the bottom of the sea. It would be impossible to recite that blessing with a snorkel on, but luckily he was in a submarine. And if there were Jewish men on Mars and Jewesses on Venus, he would even hit a few high notes there, too.

Yet, Malovany once visited a place where there were even less displays of Jewish life than might be found in orbit—Pultusk, Poland, a town 50 kilometers from Warsaw that was once replete with Jews and where his father was born. Upon an invitation from the Pultusk Academy of the Humanities, the popular cantor went to Poland and to 26 Warsaw Street, his father's childhood home. All that remained of the house were the gates, but they served as an entrée into the past and a world long lost.

"My father was my hero," he says. "To be in that town where he breathed his first breath and to be on the spot where he grew up was very important to me." But Malovany sadly noted that there was no sign that Jews had ever lived there. At his behest, the academy built a monument in the center of town in memory of the Jews who died there and also developed a department of Judaic Studies. "Now when Jews come, they have somewhere to go to

and pray and pour their hearts out," he says. Thanks to the influential Fifth Avenue *chazzan*, a black stone inscribed in Hebrew, Polish, and Yiddish stands in Pultusk as a concrete reminder: "Never again!"

"Because of my travels, I've adopted communities around the world as my congregations and have become the honorary cantor in such places as Warsaw, Moscow, and Vilnius," he says. In many of those places, it was not only the audience that was brought to tears, but



(r-l) Malovany with Ariel Sharon and Rabbi Israel Meir Lau.

Malovany as well, who was deeply moved by the unity of the Jewish people no matter how scattered across the globe they may be. "To see Jews who we thought were as far away as the moon moved by Jewish music was illuminating," says the *chazzan*. "I learned that Jewish hearts pump the same in Budapest, New York, Paris, Johannesburg, Warsaw, and Jerusalem. Through ancient melodies, a dispersed nation was unified by notes that plucked on common heartstrings. They cried in solidarity for the chaotic, deep, beautiful, and painful symphony called Jewish history. The years of political oppression had suppressed many from saying what their tears soulfully declared: 'Ich bin eine Jüde.'"

The accolades Malovany receives all but drown out his own voice. Countless awards, acknowledgements, and photos with the who's who consume the walls of Malovany's East Side Manhattan apartment, an apartment that exudes warmth and sophistication, as does the cantor and his bubbly wife, Beatrice, who is an accomplished painter. All of these objects of appreciation prove that Cantor Joseph Malovany's great talent and great deeds are not recognized by Jews alone. He has received numerous honors and awards from other communities as well, who recognize the unifying power of his voice and music.

In a fitting coincidence, as relates to Malovany, the words *voice* and *all* are phonetically identical in Hebrew. And indeed, through his "voice," he has been able to unite "all." He has received the Legion of Honor from the President of the Republic of Poland at Blair House and has received the Catholic

Church's Heart to Hearts Award. He was also recently awarded the International Award for Tolerance by UNESCO and the Polish government. And as an avid coin collector, he was grateful and delighted to receive a special coin bearing his name from the Lithuanian government.

"I pride myself on being able to get along with everyone," Malovany says. "I love all people and I am told that people can feel it. I believe that is why I can immediately establish contact with the audience." This is a belief that is true to the Jewish teaching which states, "That which comes from the heart, is sure to touch the heart of another."

Photo courtesy of Joseph Malovany

Born in Tel-Aviv, Israel, Joseph Malovany's singing career began early. His mother, originally from Sighet, Hungary, convinced her husband that their son should attend Bilu Synagogue School, a school that trained students in a manner similar to the Vienna Boys Choir. It quickly became clear that mother knew best. By age 7 he was a member of the Bilu Synagogue Choir, by 12 he became its director, and by 16, he was leading the High Holiday services. Eventually Malovany joined the Israeli Defense Force and fought for his country not only with guns but also with prayers, serving as cantor of the Israeli Army from 1960 to 1963. He also continued his musical education under the renowned teacher and composer Shlomo Ravitz. He earned the highest artistic diplomas from the Music Academy in Tel Aviv, from Great Britain's Royal Academy, and from Trinity College of Music. He held positions at synagogues in Johannesburg, South Africa, and London, England, and then he moved to New York and has been part of the famed Fifth Avenue Synagogue for 35 years.

Malovany values every moment of it. As a passionate collector of wrist watches, he says that he is very conscious of the passage of time and makes every effort to use it wisely.

Malovany's life has been a colorful melody filled with grace notes, trills,

and crescendos of success. He feels his life has been blessed by the power of prayer. And for those who question the power of prayer, Malovany has a personal story to share. One day, in the middle of a performance, the beloved *chazzan* who has prayed beside countless sickbeds and deathbeds, collapsed.

people he had inspired, all the hearts he had set ablaze, all the songs to which he had given sound, and all the souls he had shaken, now all echoed back in a thunderous prayer: *El Na Rafah Na* ["God please heal him."] Interestingly, the mystical teachings of Judaism, the Kabbala, points out that in

Hebrew numerology the value of the Hebrew words for voice, *kol*, and ladder, *sulam*, are equivalent. Voiced prayers rise up as a ladder to connect to God. And He must have listened—with so many voices having climbed the ladder to God's ears on his behalf—because today, to the astonishment of all his doctors, Malovany is cancer free.

"My faith has become even stronger since I was sick," Malovany shares. "I had conversations with God and asked him why are You doing this to me? Are You testing me?" He admits that his singing has improved because of his sickness. Now it is instilled with even greater compassion and sensitivity. But to a people who are known for asking too many questions, God doesn't always answer them, nor has he answered Malovany's question of "Why?"

Nonetheless, Malovany says that he has emerged stronger in many ways and

will continue to do the work of the Jewish nation. And as he stands on the *bima* [pulpit] day after day, *Shabbat* after *Shabbat*, Yom Kippur after Yom Kippur, talking to God on his people's behalf, they are evermore encouraged to reply, "Amen!" [lifestyles](http://lifestyles.com)



(l-r) Senator John McCain with Beatrice and Joseph Malovany.



With Henry Kissinger.

Diagnosed with colon cancer that had already infiltrated his liver, the prognosis was worse than dire. This time, he would have to pray for himself. But he did not pray alone. All the people that Malovany had met throughout his travels, all the people he had touched, all the people he had helped, all the

Photo courtesy of Joseph Malovany

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