

New York Ordination Kavanah  
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Depending on how you count, one of the very first things God says after creating us human beings is: **לֹא־טוֹב הָיְתָה הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ** — “It is not good for the human to be alone” (Gen. 2:18). In a newly created world that is declared to be very good — **וַהֲנִי־טוֹב מְאֹד** (Gen. 1:31) — the first thing that is not good is isolation.

To solve this problem, God proposes a solution: **אֶעֱשֶׂה־לּוֹ עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ** — “I will make the human an *ezer kenegdo*” (Gen. 2:18). For over two thousand years, commentators have grappled with the meaning of this enigmatic phrase. Our teacher, HUC-JIR Professor Emerita Rabbi Tamara Eskenazi, asserts that God’s decision to create an *ezer kenegdo* — literally, a “helper opposite” the first human being — is “not necessarily or even primarily” about loneliness, but is instead about the human need for partnership.

Reading Genesis 2:18 along with philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, Dr. Eskenazi argues that if we human beings are to flourish, we need meaningful encounters with people who will support and challenge us, people who will not merely echo our own views, but take a stand with us — and sometimes a stand against us.<sup>i</sup>

This, Rabbi Eskenazi teaches, is what it means to be an *ezer kenegdo*. This, she writes, is what “provides the necessary dialogue for human maturation, meaning, and joy.”<sup>ii</sup>

Today, as we prepare to ordain twenty-one new cantors and rabbis, the foundational need for an *ezer kenegdo* captures what calls many of our students to a life of sacred service.

In a post-pandemic era when loneliness and social isolation are classified as a public health concern, in an age of rampant political polarization, at a moment when so many Jews feel isolated and alone, **לֹא־טוֹב הָיְתָה הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ** — It is not good for us to be alone.

Now more than ever, we need rabbis and cantors to accompany us when we descend into **גַּי אֶלְמֹת** (Ps 23:4) — the deep, dark valley of death and mourning; to sit by our bedside when illness beckons; to stand with us underneath the chuppah or on the bima; to lead us along paths of righteousness — **בְּמַעְגְלֵי־צֶדֶק** (Ps 23:3) — with the moral compass and timeless teachings that our tradition offers. This is what it means to be an *ezer kenegdo*.

Now more than ever, we need cantors and rabbis who can find the right melodies and the right words to help us make sense of our lives and to help us sense something transcendent in the universe.

We need rabbis and cantors who can build engaged and engaging communities, who can bring people together so we feel connected to others and connected to something larger and more lasting than our ephemeral selves. This is what it means to become *k'lei kodesh*.

This is what it means to be linked in an ancient chain of tradition — *shalshet hakabbalah* — that stretches all the way back back to Moses and Joshua, to Miriam and Devorah, to countless generations of leaders and teachers of Torah.

Beloved students, as you ascend this bima and stand before this holy ark, you take your place in this storied, sacred line of transmission.

With the ancient act of *s'michat yadayim*, the laying on of hands, and the equally ancient words of *birkat kohanim*, the Priestly Blessing, you will become cantors and rabbis. At that moment, you take on the obligations and expectations incumbent upon those who dedicate their lives to *avodat hakodesh*: to the sacred work of serving God and the Jewish people with integrity and authenticity, with reverence and humility.

Dear ordinees, as you prepare to pledge yourselves to preserve the age-old covenant between God and Israel: קָדְשׁ יְהוָה (Lev. 19:2) — be holy, and be a blessing — יְהוָה בְּרַכְךָ (Gen. 12:2) — as we call you now to be ordained as rabbis and cantors in Israel.

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<sup>i</sup> Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, “Non-Gender Equality at Creation: The ‘Other’ Benefits of Partnership,” <https://www.thetorah.com/article/non-gender-equality-at-creation-the-other-benefits-of-partners>.

<sup>ii</sup> Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, Parashat B’reishit, *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, p. 12.