

A Celebration of Chanukah Stories

“I can’t believe it,” Daniel said; “every other song is written by him!”

It was true. Daniel Klein, the Reform minyan rabbinic advisor, a large handful of students, and I were sitting in Rabb Hall the evening of December 7, 2007, flipping through the *Shivinu* songbook. We had gathered for a Chanukah song session with Cantor Jeff Klepper, the well-known Jewish songwriter, performer, and cantor, whose compositions were familiar to many in the group. I was amazed to see how prolific Cantor Klepper has been—and still is—in the world of contemporary Jewish music. His name, along with those of Debbie Friedman and Dan Frelander, peppered the pages of the songbook. I enjoyed those songs often as a child, but only that night realized the origins of many of the tunes, and their connection to Cantor Klepper.

Shivinu is not the only place where Cantor Klepper’s music seems to reign supreme. He has recorded many albums, both solo and with Rabbi

Dan Frelander. The duo form the group *Kol B’Seder* and together they have performed and recorded songs (Klepper has composed more than 200) for over 30 years. He grew up in New York City, studied under Abraham Wolfe Binder, and has worked as a cantor at Beth Emet the Free Synagogue in Evanston, Illinois, and in Israel. Currently he is serving at Temple Sinai, located in Sharon, Massachusetts.

The evening began with each of us introducing ourselves by name, concentration, and home synagogue. One student who grew up at Beth Emet fondly recalled how Cantor Klepper’s music shaped her early Jewish experience. Cantor Klepper happily shared the fact that he had Bar Mitzvah’ed another student in attendance, Seth Flaxman, ’08. Cantor Klepper knew almost every rabbi and cantor that we mentioned; already he had formed a community of the students present, simply by knowing a little about so many of our religious lives at home.

After we sang a few Chanukah songs, Cantor Klepper entertained us with several Jewish parodies of Bob Dylan songs. He finished the session with two gems from the Klepper canon—“Shalom Rav” and “Oseh Shalom.”

For me, these two were filled with meaning: with their simple beauty, these songs have helped me find a real home in the Jewish community here at Harvard. I can only assume they produced a similar effect for those who have sung them since childhood.

Having met Cantor Klepper, I can say first-hand that his music truly

reflects his personality: welcoming, passionate, funny, and, most of all, eager to capture the Jewish tradition in song. Seth, who helped bring Cantor Klepper to Harvard, seemed to agree: “It wasn’t just nostalgia for song sessions at Sunday School,” Seth remarked. “Cantor Klepper’s melodies really enlarge and enliven the words. Also, his parodies are hilarious.” ■



Cantor Jeff Klepper connects with Harvard Hillel students on Dec. 7th.



As a composer of more than 200 songs, including the widely-known prayer melodies *Shalom Rav* and *Oseh Shalom*, Cantor Jeff Klepper is one of the most renowned musicians in contemporary American Judaism. Drawing on an eclectic blend of folk, rock, jazz, Chassidic and Middle-Eastern sounds, combined with original lyrics that are witty and insightful, Jeff has created a new and unique Jewish musical style. His services—particularly the monthly *Shabbat b'simcha*, are celebrations of the Jewish spirit. As cantor, Jeff leads services, teaches music and shares his love of Jewish music with the entire congregation.