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One bright afternoon in June, a few friends and I were eating lunch in Bryant Park. An outdoor jazz concert was scheduled for one o'clock, so we passed the time chatting under the trees of this little park in the heart of midtown Manhattan. If it had been like most summer afternoons, I would have been far away from New York City strumming a guitar and leading the lunchtime song session at a Jewish overnight camp. However, on this particular occasion, I was taking a break from six continuous years of camp songleading and seeking out some of the cultural offerings of NYC instead. Suddenly my phone rang, and to my surprise it was an unlisted number. Curious, I stood up from the picnic blanket and walked to a quiet area to answer the call. The voice on the other line said, "Hello, I'm hoping to speak with Cantor O'Brien."

The mysterious caller, Cliff, along with his wife, Pamela, informed me of their recent move from New York City to Dubai, a metropolis in the United Arab Emirates. The couple had been members of Stephen Wise Free Synagogue in New York City, the same community where I have served the past four years as cantorial intern. Pamela and Cliff explained that, although they lived halfway around the world, they wanted to celebrate their son's bar mitzvah at Stephen Wise the following June. "Our son Ethan doesn't read Hebrew yet," admitted Cliff, "but he is a bright kid, and very persistent too." After a slight pause, Pamela asked, "Would you be willing to prepare Ethan for his bar mitzvah?"

I was immediately inspired by Ethan's family for reaching out to provide him with a meaningful Jewish experience. Although there would be challenges to overcome, I

valued Cliff and Pamela's request because I strongly believe that part of being a cantor is meeting people where they are spiritually or geographically. "Of course this will require approval from the senior clergy," I commented, "with their consent, we will make this bar mitzvah happen!" Returning to the picnic blanket, I asked my group of friends "Does anyone know the time difference between New York and Dubai?"

The more I learned about Ethan and his family, the more I appreciated the remarkable nature of his Jewish journey—because of his father's career, Ethan was being raised primarily by his Hindu mother in a majority Muslim country. Having come from an inter-faith family myself, I felt a personal responsibility to give Ethan a positive and compelling introduction to Jewish learning and community.

For the next 12 months, Ethan and I met twice a week via Skype. Over a distance of nearly 7,000 miles we studied the Hebrew letters, practiced Torah and Haftarah chanting, and talked about the meaning of numerous blessings that Ethan would lead during his bar mitzvah. We even discussed Rabbinic philosophy and read together key passages from the Mishnah. During these discussions I was consistently amazed by Ethan's determination, as well as his thoughtful questions regarding Jewish history and beliefs.

What surprised me most about these lessons was how much I ended up learning. Ethan reminded me that Jewish involvement is not a given for every Jew, and that as members of the Jewish community we share an obligation to help those who face challenges to communal involvement. Ethan also taught me that we should never take for granted our unique heritage as Jews—stories, customs, humor, literature, music, cuisine, and culture. All of these aspects of Jewish civilization add meaning to our lives and

create opportunities for spiritual growth. Conveying these Jewish tenants and traditions to students, congregants, and future generations is the essence of why I have chosen to become a professional cantor.

One year after answering their call, I had the honor of standing beside Pamela and Cliff as their son chanted from the Torah scroll. Ethan's parents were beaming with pride during their son's bar mitzvah, and the entire community of Stephen Wise shared in their *naches* (proud enjoyment). At the reception following the service, one of Ethan's aunts expressed to me how much this ceremony meant to their family. "This time last year," she conceded, "Some of us had no idea what a bar mitzvah was. Now we see what a meaningful experience this has been for Ethan and our family."

For these things, I pray—to find new opportunities for connection, to develop a cantorate that is open and flexible, and to always meet people where they are.