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LIFESTYLE PEOPLE

# Local Gay Cantor Makes History

*Mark Goldman elected president of American Conference of Cantors*

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For 19 years, the congregants of Temple Kol Ami Emunu-El have heard the tenor of their cantor's voice carry over the sanctuary, singing Hebrew blessings and ushering in Shabbat after a week of work.

Mark Goldman, the cantor of the reform Jewish temple in Plantation, not only has

lead services week after week, but now will play a role on the national level as the president of the American Conference of Cantors -- and its first openly gay one at that.

"I certainly feel very, very proud to be openly gay and for the organization to have elected me, and for that never to have been

an issue or anything that was even spoken about," he said.

Cantors play an important role in the Jewish faith. As ordained Jewish clergy members, they're known for leading the service's music but also are involved in other facets, such as counseling, preparing children for their bar/bat mitzvah, teaching, spiritual guidance, planning programming, events, fundraisers, and more.

Many LGBT people find difficulty maintaining their faith, many of which don't condone homosexuality, while staying true to their sexual identity. Goldman experienced the same struggle growing up in London, England as a part of the Orthodox Jewish community, one of the strictest sects of the faith.

Coming from a long line of cantors, Goldman remembers going to the synagogue every Saturday morning with his father and being enamored by the music at the services. The cantor took him under his wing and involved him in the music and the services, and Goldman knew it was something he wanted to do when he grew up. He took vocal lessons in high school and later went on to the London School of Jewish Studies for a degree in Jewish Studies and a cantorial diploma.

However, it was at the age of 11 or 12 that he experienced confusion with his identity and religion.

"I attended an Orthodox Jewish school and I clearly remember hearing from the rabbis, when somehow the subject of homosexuality came up, that this was something that was strictly against Judaism and was abhorrent to Judaism, and I clearly remember thinking, oh my goodness, am I the person that they're talking about?" he said. "I can certainly say that my adolescent years and even as far into my early 20s were very difficult years for me."

In fact, he didn't come out to his parents until he was 27 years old. After attending school in London, he moved to the United States and attended the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, NY when he accepted a calling to serve as cantor at a conservative synagogue -- a more liberal sect of the Jewish faith than Orthodox. When his rabbi at the orthodox temple in London found out he was going to be at a conservative temple, he

refused to attend Goldman's last service.

When Goldman confided in some cantors but encouraged him to move into a more liberal community to practice Judaism.

"I never confided in any member of the Orthodox Jewish community about my sexual identity because by that time I'd already left the Orthodox Jewish community and I never really felt it would be safe to tell anybody because I knew as soon as I told anybody, I would immediately be ostracized," he said.

In 1995, he joined the congregation of Temple Kol Ami Emunu-El in Plantation, a reform Jewish synagogue. Two years later, he met his life partner Aaron Taber, an interior designer. There, it was a completely different experience as staff and congregants were nonchalant about his sexual orientation. Rather, they've only been impressed and proud of his talents and achievements. Taber is never left out of any bios on Goldman in temple fliers, programs and handouts.

"I've only ever received support and encouragement in everything that I've done and certainly my sexuality has never been questioned. It's never been an issue from any perspective. Both myself and my partner have always been welcomed into the congregation and he's treated as my spouse," Goldman said.

He was a part of a group of North American cantors to perform at the Vatican in 2010, possibly the first time Jewish songs were performed there. He has also been active with the American Conference of Cantors, the largest agency of its kind in the world, and became president this summer. A press release (<http://accantors.org/acc/node/1074>) went out announcing that the conference had installed its first openly gay president.

Goldman encourages others who are religious and LGBT to seek out family and friends who support them, and that it's possible to find an accepting denomination.

"I feel that I was able to deal with a situation that initially seemed like it was impossible to deal with because of the conflict of being gay but also wanting to be a cantor, which at the time and place that I grew up would have been completely impossible," Goldman said. "I was able to find a direction that worked and was able to combine the parts of who I." **SFGN**

