

ARTS & LIFE



PHOTO BY FRAN PUTNEY

Members of the Atlanta Jewish Male Choir rehearse for a taping of "Tikkun Olam" on Atlanta Interfaith Broadcasting.

Musical Mission

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By FRAN NACHMAN PUTNEY

The Jewish Times

At a recent Sunday evening rehearsal, conductor Barry Herman instructed members of the Atlanta Jewish Male Choir to "sing out confidently."

The 14-member group is preparing its debut concert, "Days of Awe: Music for the Soul," scheduled Sept. 7 at Ahavath Achim Synagogue.

The choir has been practicing four to five hours weekly for what Herman, 37, a transplanted South African, calls an "ambitious" program that will include traditional songs, liturgical music and duets.

"The music is very complex. It's quite challenging," said Cantor Joel Fox, Ahavath Achim's new *chazzan*, who will participate in the concert along with the Conservative *shul's* cantor emeritus, Isaac Goodfriend.

"But the choir will definitely do more than justice to the music, and I'm looking forward to a beautiful interpretation of it. It's beautiful music — traditional and historical," said Fox.

Since its formation by former South African and choral enthusiast Meyer Janet a year ago, the choir has been working diligently toward its debut. In just 12 months, Herman says, the group has mastered a repertoire that typically takes two to three years to learn.

"The harmonies are exquisite," said Herman. "You get the feeling of praying. You literally feel an exploding from the harmonies."

This is quite a feat considering that Herman, who by day manages Light Bulbs Unlimited, is not a professional musician. But he, like Janet, has been involved in choirs since childhood. Herman performed in and conducted numerous choirs in South Africa and has studied under two of the most prestigious choir directors in that part of the world — Gus Levy and Jos Stern.

Janet, 53, has wanted to organize a Jewish male choir since moving to Atlanta in 1994. But those who told him that choirs were "a South African thing" or that they were only organized by "less seri-

ous strains of Judaism" thwarted his initial efforts, he said.

Fortunately, when Janet, owner of Design Plus, a company that manages brand-licensing programs, learned that Herman, whom he knew from South Africa, was moving to Atlanta in the spring of 2002, he knew that at last he had a way to turn his dream into reality.

The choir moved one step closer to formation in March 2002, when Janet and his wife, Carol, helped bring the Sydenham Highlands North Choir to Congregation Beth Jacob. The concert raised \$40,000 for Israel's Magen David Adom (the equivalent of the American Red Cross), and brought together choir aficionados, who learned of Janet's plan.

Eventually, Janet assembled singers who range widely in age, level of Jewish observance and vocal experience. Some, like Steve Ellenoff, have no previous choir experience.

"My background is not any of this. Every single piece of music I've learned is a complete and utter mystery to me. It's an extra challenge," he said.

As the debut looms, however, Ellenoff says the effort has paid off. "I'm so excited for my friends who haven't heard this. It's a spiritual uplifting of music."

The concert will also feature Cantor Steven Leas, who, as *chazzan* of the Great Portland/Central Synagogue of London, holds one of the highest-ranking cantorial positions in England, according to Fox.

Fox will sing several duets with Goodfriend in a symbolic passing of the baton. Expressing admiration and affection for Goodfriend, Fox said, "This will be the first time he and I will be performing together on the same pulpit where he spent 30 years, and I'm just starting. We will be hand-in-hand and side-by-side in the actual sanctuary."

In addition to inspiring audiences, the choir has another goal: to present and preserve what Herman calls "the rich heritage" of Jewish liturgical music that is dying out.

Some of the music, according to Herman, is hundreds of years old. Most of it is Ashkenazic in origin and written by composers who

If You Go

"Days of Awe: Music for the Soul" will be performed 7:30 p.m. Sept. 7 at Ahavath Achim Synagogue, 600 Peachtree Battle Ave. Tickets are \$18 for adults; \$10 for senior citizens and students 8-18. Epstein's "Tikkun Olam" program featuring the choir will air 7 p.m. Sept. 3 and 1:30 p.m. Sept. 7. AIB is found on Comcast channel 5, BellSouth American channel 4 and Charter Communications channels 14 and 22.

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hailed from Vienna or Berlin.

For Janet, presenting the music is imperative. "The Jewish people are not only the people of the book, but of memory. We have a rich memory. Here in the Southeast [United States] this collective memory has faded."

Citing biblical examples such as Moses singing at the parting of the Red Sea, Janet added, "This music is the soundtrack for the Jewish story."

The choir also acts as a fundraising resource for local and Israeli charities. The Sept. 7 concert will benefit the Koby Mandell Foundation, founded by the parents of 13-year-old Israeli Koby Mandell who, along with a friend, was stoned to death by terrorists while hiking in 2001. The foundation provides healing programs for families affected by terrorism.

According to Ahavath Achim President Sam Schatten, more than \$21,000 has already been raised from patrons who have paid \$100 for two tickets. Schatten expects to have 200 patrons for the event.

Jan Epstein of Atlanta Interfaith Broadcasters (AIB) has

videotaped and interviewed members of the choir for her program "Tikkun Olam." She characterized some of the music as "intense" and "beautiful."

"They are really committed to singing together and to making beautiful traditional music," she said.

Eventually, the choir's goal is to archive its repertoire in a library of Jewish music. Herman already owns hundreds of manuscripts, and the group would like to procure others, as well as recordings, from outside sources. Ultimately, the members want to commission composers and arrangers to create new music. The founders also hope to recruit new members at the AA concert.

Rehearsals have engendered "a wonderful sense of bonding," said choir member Warren Jacobs. "We are really gelling as a group. The sense of wonderment and unity [we feel] adds so much to the music."

But ultimately, the reason for the choir's commitment can be answered by a Yiddish song called "Var vos singt a chazzan" — Why does a *chazzan* sing? The answer, says Janet, is "because he loves to sing what he is singing." □