Newton’s Temple Emanuel boasts rare rabbi-cantor

BY CINDY CANTRELL | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

In her teens, Aliza Berger of Waltham struggled with choosing between her seemingly disparate dreams of becoming a rabbi or opera singer.

Thanks to the new Rav-Hazzan program at Hebrew College in Newton, the 28-year-old has combined both passions. After graduating this spring as the school’s first ordained rabbi-cantor – and one of only a few in the country – she joined the clergy team at Temple Emanuel in Newton.

Berger said music always held an important place in her family, with frequent “music nights” of singing and dancing at her home within the Jewish Renewal community of Denver.

She listened to jazz, folk, classical, and rock, and her grandmother played opera while preparing for Shabbat.

“She’d stop what she was doing and close her eyes,” Berger recalled, “and you’d see in her face that something magical was happening in the music.”

Berger began studying piano at age 6, and added voice lessons in her early teens. In her junior year of high school, she became the youngest member of the Denver Opera Company and studied privately with founder and director Nicholas Laurioli.

Berger then studied classical voice and Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt University, but found she didn’t enjoy the music competition or solitary practice sessions.

“I still loved opera,” she said, “but I wanted to make music within a community and create a spiritual experience together.”

After graduating and living in Israel for a year, Berger enrolled at Hebrew College in 2012. Prior to joining Temple Emanuel, she was the rabbinic intern at Temple Aliyah in Needham and Nehar Shalom Community Synagogue in Jamaica Plain, and the High Holiday cantorial soloist for Temple Israel of Boston and Temple Anshe Anumim in Pittsfield.

In most synagogues, a rabbi is the community's spiritual leader, while cantors are professionally trained musicians who lead prayer services. As a rabbi-cantor, Berger leads services while singing Jewish liturgical music and opera, officiates at weddings and funerals, works with teens, and connects with 20-somethings.

“I especially love helping teens and young adults find out who they are,” Berger said, “and assisting them in becoming more grounded in Jewish tradition, so they can grow and make a positive change on the planet.”

Waltham’s Aliza Berger is a rabbi-cantor.

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