

Paul Kowarsky (1942-2025)

Remembered by Marina Shemesh

It is my honor to write in memory of someone I loved deeply and who had such a profound impact on my life: Hazzan Paul Kowarsky. Although I only knew Paul for a relatively short time, meeting him changed me forever.

I first met him in the fall of 1999, when I joined the professional choir of Beth Tzedec Congregation in Toronto. From the very first rehearsal, I was struck by his extraordinary voice, his wit, his intellect, his humor, and his warmth. As an opera singer myself, I admired his flawless technique and the golden tone of his spinto tenor, but what moved me even more was the way he infused every note with spirit and soul. He was not only a brilliant singer and a passionate hazzan but also a gifted composer whose music we often sang in choir.



As a newcomer to Canada, I was especially grateful for the kindness and support he extended to me and my family. After hearing me sing solo, he encouraged me to consider a cantorial career. That encouragement changed the course of my life. We began studying together in preparation for my audition for the cantorial school in New York. Paul became my first true mentor in hazzanut, opening the door for me to discover the majesty and beauty of synagogue music. For this, I will always carry a debt of gratitude and love. He helped me find not just a profession, but a calling.

Paul Kowarsky's own journey was remarkable. He successfully balanced two distinguished careers: as an internationally acclaimed cantor and later as a respected lawyer and Justice of the Peace. From 1980 until his retirement in 2001, he served as Senior Cantor of Beth Tzedec Congregation, the largest Conservative synagogue in North America. In May 2002, he was appointed a full-time presiding Justice of the Peace by the Government of Ontario, serving faithfully until his retirement in 2017.

Paul was born in South Africa in 1942. His vocal gifts were evident from an early age: at just nine, he became the boy soloist of the Berea Synagogue Choir in Johannesburg, mentored by Hazzan Shlomo Mandel. He later studied with the legendary Hazzan Leib Glantz at the Tel Aviv Cantorial Academy. Upon returning to Johannesburg, he continued studying with Hazzan Mandel while pursuing voice lessons with Francis Russell for over a decade. He also studied music at the University of South Africa.

Alongside his cantorial career, Paul pursued law. He earned a Bachelor of Law degree from the University of South Africa and was admitted as an Attorney of the Supreme Court in 1972. After practicing law for several years, he immigrated to Canada in 1976, where he became hazzan of Congregation Beth Ora in Montreal. He later served as hazzan of Adath Israel

Congregation in Cincinnati, Ohio (where he also studied at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music), before settling in Toronto. In Canada he studied with Marlena Malas, the renowned vocal coach of Metropolitan Opera singers, and later with Canadian tenor Mark DuBois for 12 years.

He held a Cantorial Qualification Diploma from the Cantors Assembly, a Master Cantor Certificate from the American Foundation for the Advancement of Cantorial Arts and was named an Honorary Fellow of the Cantors Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

Throughout his cantorial career, Paul was considered one of the foremost *hazzanim* of his generation. The combination of his remarkable voice and his soul-stirring interpretations of liturgy earned him the highest acclaim from his peers. One review described a performance at the 32nd Cantors Assembly Convention in New York this way:

“Cantor Paul Kowarsky was honored with a standing ovation by the more than 1,200 persons attending...Kowarsky’s rendition of *R’tzei* was likened by his peers to an artist creating a masterpiece on canvas. His brilliant cantorial presentation shocked and awed the elite of the cantorial fraternity.”

As a concert artist, Paul traveled across the globe, singing to capacity audiences and drawing admiration wherever he performed. Some of his most notable appearances included:

- The *Great Cantors of the World in Concert Yom Ha’atzmaut* program in Cleveland (1985)
- The main concert of the International Cantors Convention at the Jerusalem Theatre (1987)
- Representing the Jewish community at the Multi-Faith Service at Roy Thomson Hall in Toronto (1988)
- The Toronto Community Reception in honor of Chaim Herzog, President of Israel (1989)
- A concert series in Los Angeles, *Seven Outstanding Cantors of North America* (1989)

That same year, Paul performed in a concert tour sponsored by the American Society for the Advancement of Cantorial Arts, singing in major cities across the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Romania, including Moscow, Leningrad, Minsk, Odessa, Belgrade, and Bucharest. His concert tours also brought him to London’s Logan Hall and to Toronto’s Canadian National Exhibition, where he appeared in *The Night of a Lifetime*, celebrating Israel’s 50th anniversary.

During his 1999–2000 sabbatical, Paul led services and concerts in Venice, Florence, Geneva, Budapest, Prague, Vilnius, Kaunas, Melbourne, Sydney, and Auckland.

Paul was also a prolific composer. The Toronto Council of *Chazzanim* published two volumes of his works, *Synagogue Music for Cantor and Choir* (1990 and 1995). His compositions reflected a synthesis of Eastern European *hazzanut* with the lyrical, song-like qualities of *Hasidic* melody. Upon his retirement, he gifted me these volumes, inscribed with words of encouragement that I treasure to this day.

In addition to his publications, Paul released eight CDs and several instructional recordings for synagogue services and the Passover *Seder*. Many of these, along with his writings, reflections, and audio and video recordings, remain accessible at paulkowarsky.ca.

When Paul reached the age of mandatory retirement from his legal activity in 2017, he published *The Justice of the Peace in Ontario: Practice and Procedure*, a resource he wrote to guide his newer colleagues.

But beyond all his professional accomplishments, what stood out most about Paul was his humanity. He was generous, funny, deeply caring, and always ready to support others—whether it was a young cantor finding her way or a congregant in need of comfort.

His impact reached far beyond the pulpit. As a concert artist, he brought Jewish music to audiences all over the world—from Jerusalem to London, from Moscow to Sydney. His recordings, compositions, and teachings continue to inspire and bring joy.

Paul Kowarsky passed away peacefully on August 10, 2025, at the age of 83. He leaves behind his devoted wife, Barbara, his five beloved children, and many grandchildren, who were his pride and joy.

For me, and for so many others, Paul was more than a cantor, a lawyer, or a judge. He was a mentor, a colleague, and a friend. His kindness and encouragement changed my life; his music continues to inspire me every day. The sound of his voice, and the warmth of his heart, will live on in all who were fortunate enough to know him.

May his memory always be for a blessing, and may his music and spirit continue to inspire generations to come.