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Singing the diaspora

Global Jewish influences inspire the Robyn Helzner Trio's music

By Amanda Korman

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Every Saturday morning, before Rabbi Deborah Zecher begins the Shabbat prayer service, she reads a bit of Hassidic teaching from the Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz: "Alone I cannot lift up my voice in song. Then you come near and sing with me, our prayers fuse and a new voice soars."

Music encourages connection between people, Zecher explained in an interview. At her congregation, Hevreh of Southern Berkshire in Great Barrington, the act of voices joining other voices is often more vital than the words of prayer themselves, she said.

In the spirit of this teaching, three new, harmonious voices will join Hevreh congregants and audience members tonight at 7:30 p.m. The Robyn Helzner Trio, including Robyn Helzner on guitar, Dov Weitman on mandolin and guitar, Matt Holsen on bass and keyboards and all three on vocals, combines Jewish and universal themes to create their music.

"As Jewish people, we have worked throughout history to put our stories in the songs. It's a wonderful way to connect with our Jewish roots, and at the same time the messages are universal," Helzner said.



The Robyn Helzner Trio will bring their eclectic folk music to Hevreh of the Southern Berkshires in Great Barrington, tonight at 7:30 p.m.

Helzner names the trio's genre "world Jewish music," because, as she explains, Jews have lived all over the world so that the cultural influences on their music are truly global. The trio sings in Hebrew, Yiddish and Ladino, a Judeo-Spanish language.

"We can sing about love, community, work, and the fact that we're singing it in these Jewish language makes it a Jewish song," Helzner said.

During performances, Helzner often explains the meaning of the lyrics and puts the

song in cultural context. "This is the challenge of a group like ours — to be able to communicate these songs to people who don't speak the languages," she said.

As the Washington Post described the trio's most recent album, "Signs & Wonders," "the music is its own reward." Songs from the Sephardic tradition in Spain about Yemenite melodies and native Israeli pieces. The trio composes its own three-part harmony arrangements collaboratively, working through the music to find the best way to express the meaning of the song. For instance, their rendition of "Am Yisroel Chai" takes a uniquely hopeful song sung by Jews in displaced persons camps in Europe after World War II and combines it with an upbeat Israeli horah, or dance melody.

Recently performing on the National Mall in Washington D.C. for a crowd of tens of thousands in celebration of Israel's 60th anniversary, the trio plays mostly Jewish venues. Their music appeals to a wider audience than just the Jewish community, especially those interested in ancient cultures and traditions in music.

"Robyn's music transcends religious boundaries. Anyone can be lifted up by it," Zecher said.