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- Jewish Newsreel
- Commentary
- Editorial
- Op-Eds
- Letters to the Editor
- NJJN Blogs
- Kahntentions
- Kaplan's Korner
- Nu Online
- Our Tribe & Joy
- News
- Statewide
- World
- Greater MetroWest
- Middlesex/Monmouth
- Princeton Mercer Bucks
- Life and Times
- Life and Times
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- Touch of Torah
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- Community
- The Source
- Events Calendar
- Synagogue Listings
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Home > Greater MetroWest News

A spiritual nomad explores a familiar home

by **Johanna Ginsberg**
NJJN Staff Writer
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Billy Jonas has spent his share of time exploring different faiths, from his own Judaism to Buddhism, to Lakota sweat lodge rituals. His music reflects the many stops on his spiritual journey.



His November release, “HaBayta,” a Hebrew term which translates loosely as “Homeward,” reveals his recent deeper explorations of Judaism.

“I like to erase the separation between people and other people, between people and the world, between people and God,” he told NJ Jewish News while en route in his Honda Odyssey to performances in Florida.

His overall message, whether in church, synagogue, or secular contexts is “we’re all in this together.”

He will be bringing his music to Congregation Ohr Shalom-Summit Jewish Community Center as artist-in-residence, Feb. 26-27.

Jonas, who grew up in Chicago attending Congregation Rodfei Zedek, said he was “captivated” by the cantor’s “beautiful operatic voice.” (Perhaps the cantorate is in his blood — his great-grandfather served a congregation in Alsbach, Germany, today known as Alsbach-Hahnlein.)

He has slowly developed a deeper appreciation for his Judaism over the last couple of decades, for example, incorporating the Modeh Ani prayer into his morning ritual, observing his own version of Shabbat, and finding ways to infuse other traditions into the Jewish calendar.

But he also regularly participates in services at Congregation Beth HaTephila in his hometown of Asheville, NC, as one of four soloists who perform alone as well as in harmony with one another.

A folk musician, Jonas knew early on that the rarified world of elite artistry was not for him. “I really wanted to explore an art form that would be accessible to mass audiences,” he said. “I wanted the potential to inspire others to make music out of joy and a sense of community.”

Jonas seeks and finds spirituality everywhere — and he sings about it in many of his songs, including “God is in.”

In a Jewish setting, he’ll sing from his new release, and use various songs as introductions to specific prayers — “One” introduces the Shema, for example. And a song might lead to a d’var Torah, a sermonette connecting its message to something in the weekly parsha.

He also turns found objects into musical instruments — a 35-gallon garbage into a bass drum, some corrugated drainage pipes into what he calls a “tuba-luba.” He turns a shoe (his own) and a frying pan into percussion by sticking a mallet into the former to bang on the latter.

“It comes from my interest in giving voice to all God’s creations. Everything has a voice, everything is holy,” he said of his recycled instruments. “When you take something mundane and give it a voice, you make it sacred and inspire others to see the wonder in it.”

The weekend at Congregation Ohr Shalom is sponsored by the Charles and Lillian G. Baraff Foundation, Judith and Matthew Sills, and Joan and Robert Rothberg.

If you go

What: Billy Jonas, artist-in-residence

Where: Congregation Ohr Shalom--Summit JCC

When: Friday-Saturday, Feb. 26-27

Friday, Feb. 26:

6:30 p.m.: Community Shabbat dinner with concurrent teen dinner (RSVP required)

7:30: *Kabalat* Shabbat with musical instruments

9: Billy Time with teens

Saturday, Feb. 27:

9:30 a.m.: Shabbat service with musical instruments

noon: Kiddush luncheon (RSVP required)

4:30 p.m.: Minha

5: *Seuda Shlishit* (RSVP required)

5:30: Mindfulness and *kavana* workshop

6:30: Havdala/*melave malka*

Cost: Free and open to the public

RSVP: emmy@summitjcc.org or 908-273-8130

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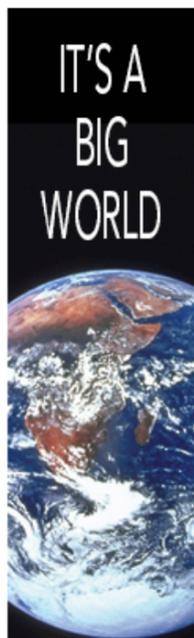
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