

# Q&A With Billy Jonas: Recycled Instruments and Jewish Summer Camp Influences

BY MELISSA APTER

What is a “neo-tribal hootenanny” or “funky family folk music” for that matter? They’re the invention of the talented Jewish musician Billy Jonas, who will perform two concerts at Tikvat Israel on March 19, accompanied by his band and with participation by Cantor Rochelle Helzner.

A 4 p.m. show will have a song list designed for families with young children, and a 7:30 p.m. show is set for adults. (See below for ticket information.)

Jonas, a native of Chicago, is known for his engaging performances that incorporate found and recycled instruments, alongside conventional instruments, to create a unique sound.

“Billy’s infectious rhythms are exciting. His personality is warm, animated and his sense of fun shines through. The Tikvat Israel community and community at large is in for a spirited treat,” said Cantor Helzner.

The *Tikvat Israel Bulletin* caught up with Jonas recently to get the inside scoop on what Tikvat Israel audiences can expect. His answers have been edited for clarity and length.

## What will families experience at your afternoon show?

**Jonas:** It’ll be a taste of funky family folk music – including the idea of the neo-tribal hootenanny. This is a highly participatory singalong and “percuss-along” concert where folks can learn their parts or create them as the songs move along. We make use of the most organic instruments possible -- our voices, our hands, feet on the floor, car keys and knees. I’ll be playing my homemade

drum kit, which includes buckets, pots, pans and a trashcan.

## How did you come up with the idea to use found and recycled instruments?

**Jonas:** I decided long ago that I wanted to make my music sound and feel inspiring and accessible to everyone. I poured all my classical training and technique into making homemade stuff sound really good. I studied the piano and guitar, trombone and composition from grade school through college. It wasn’t until I started playing homemade and found-object creations that I truly found my musical home. Once I did that, performing became a joy.

I still love using conventional instruments like guitar, piano and Middle Eastern percussion in my concerts. My other favorite thing is delicious three-part harmony on top of all the unconventional elements.

## That sounds great for kids. What will the adults be treated to at your evening performance?

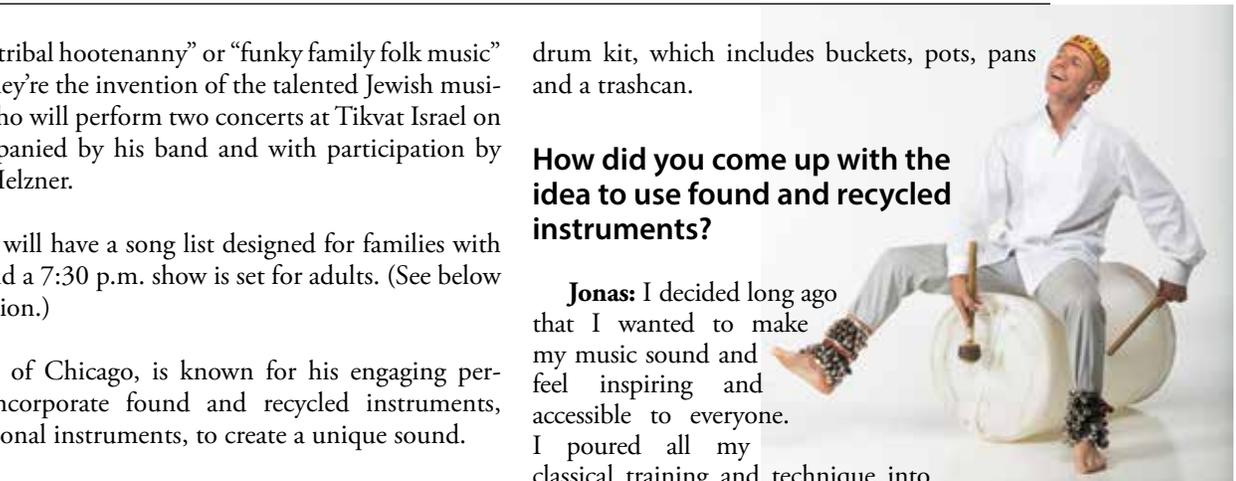
**Jonas:** The evening is an event I call “The Great Conversation” – that is, songs and stories that inspire us to explore a deeper relationship with ourselves, our community and the great beyond. The instruments will be the same, but the focus is less on participation than it is on soulful engagement. The continuity will be the melodies.

The afternoon will be extremely participatory from beginning to end while the evening will be more of a traditional concert experience.

## You come from a Jewish background. I understand that your great-grandfather was a hazzan. What was your Jewish upbringing like, and were you exposed to Jewish music growing up?

**Jonas:** I discovered I’m related to Rabbi Judah Loew, the Maharal of Prague (who is known for his alleged creation of a golem). My parents visited his grave this year in Prague. I grew up going to a Conservative synagogue in Chicago where the famous Cantor Abe Lubin filled the sanctuary with the most beautiful operatic and European traditional singing. (Lubin is the cantor emeritus of Congregation Beth El of Montgomery County, located in Bethesda, Md.) I also sang in a choir he directed. These early experiences plus the folk songs we learned in Sunday school and sang at home for the holidays were a rich musical heritage.

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## Tickets Available Now

Tickets for the two Billy Jonas Trio concerts on March 19 are available from the synagogue office (301-762-7338) or electronically at [www.tikvatisrael.org/billyjonas](http://www.tikvatisrael.org/billyjonas).

Tickets are \$10 in advance and \$12 at the door for the 4 p.m. program for families with children of all ages. Tickets are \$25 in advance and \$30 at the door for the 7:30 p.m. adult show.

Concert sponsorships also are available and encouraged. Contact the synagogue staff for details.



Otherwise, my primary musical foundation was summer camp. I went to secular summer camps that had lots of music, and it was my first experience of the magic of collective song making and singing. Those experiences, combined with my synagogue experiences, inspired me to do what I do today, specifically to find a fun and beautiful way to include everyone in celebrating their spirit and their soul.

**Last year you released an album of Jewish songs called “Habayta.” What inspired that project?**

**Jonas:** All my music is Jewish since I’m Jewish. But “Habayta” is my first explicitly Jewish project. It had been brewing for several years because when I got married and started a family, I decided to invest more time in being home. I began working at my local synagogue, Congregation Beth HaTephila in Asheville, N.C., as a cantorial soloist there a few times a month.

Almost magically at the same time, I began receiving invitations to visit synagogues all around the country. A whole repertoire of songs developed that were inspired by Jewish liturgy, as well as Jewish holidays and rituals. I also began to be aware of spaces in the standard repertoire where I felt my perspective and particular style could shine. A good example is the song “Kol Han’shama,” also known as Psalm 150, where King David says “Praise G-d with drums, flutes, crashing symbols and dancing!” I had never heard a version of the song that truly took those words to heart. At least not the way I imagined he meant them. I think he was saying, “Let’s have a neo-tribal hootenanny!” so that inspired my version.

Another example is “Ma’ariv Aravim.” There aren’t as many songful versions of that as there are the other prayers. As I meditated upon the prayer, the line *Adonai tz’vaot sh’mo* really leapt out at me. I discovered through conversations with many clergy that there was no definitive understanding of what heavenly hosts or “warrior angels” implies. My version of the song/prayer explores that.

**The song “More Love” currently featured on your website ([billyjonas.com](http://billyjonas.com)) is stunning. What was the inspiration?**

**Jonas:** “More Love” was written a year ago in honor of my friend Karleigh’s bat mitzvah. Her grandmother commissioned it as a surprise gift. I love commissions because I get to write about things I wouldn’t have ever written about. The inspiration is huge. As I meditated on the information given to me about Karleigh’s Torah portion and mitzvah project, it became clear that putting more love into the world is the ultimate agenda of any human.

After the presidential election, people were reeling from the divisiveness. My wife said we really need to post this song. Many people have shared it without having any idea about its initial inspiration. To me, the great success is that it’s relevant and applicable beyond the initial reasons for my writing it.

*(Melissa Apter, a Tikvat Israel member, is a professional journalist.)*

# Cantor’s Path to Billy Jonas Starts With a Colleague

BY JAY P. GOLDMAN, BULLETIN EDITOR



**Michelle Sobel was thrilled to meet entertainer Billy Jonas at a songleader conference in St. Louis, Mo., last year.**

So how did Billy Jonas become the featured entertainer for Tikvat Israel’s 2017 Cantor’s Concert?

Cantor Helzner needs to credit the professional introduction to her TI colleague, ECC Director Michelle Sobel, who considers herself a major fan of Jonas and his music dating back years.

“Billy’s off-beat style has permeated my house and car as my own children grew up enjoying his music,” says Sobel, who owns a bevy of the musical artist’s digital downloads and even an old DVD of Jonas performing a children’s concert.

Last February, she met Jonas in person. Sobel had received a competitive grant to participate in a Songleader Boot Camp, as part of a professional conference for early childhood educators, in St. Louis, Mo., where Jonas was one of the headline presenters.

“After a session he led about bringing engaging musical experiences to preschoolers and their families, I was able to meet him and establish a connection with him in person,” Sobel says. “I gave him my card and let him know that someone from Tikvat Israel would be contacting him to discuss possibly bringing him to Rockville, Md. We have been in touch ever since and I am thrilled to have watched this whole process come to fruition.”

She adds: “I absolutely cannot wait to share the awesomeness of Billy Jonas and his fellow musicians with our TI community.”

Cantor Helzner was sold on the idea of hosting a musical entertainer whose fare appeals as avidly to adults as children. Several months ago, she began to introduce some of Billy Jonas’ music during synagogue services so congregants would be familiar with it by show time. She incorporated Jonas’ song “Rosh Hashanah, Head of the Year” into her High Holidays repertoire, to the keen delight of Tikvat Israel’s youngest students, who eagerly sang along ahead of the shofar service.