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Peri Smilow, Singer/Activist

By Matthew J. Silver

For Peri Smilow's eighth birthday her parents gave her a guitar, but no lessons, so she asked that the babysitter her parents hired be guitar players so she could learn after the younger kids went to bed. Very smart move for an eight-year-old---her musical ability has thus far been channeled from temple religious school music teacher through community organizing and social activism into 3 CD's [so far] and national prominence as a contemporary Jewish folksinger/songwriter, and cantorial soloist, on a mission to make the world a better place. Not surprisingly, her parents were civil rights activists in the 1960's, as well as entertainers, though on an amateur level. She later took piano lessons, which she still plays, but on her 30-40 solo engagements each year she primarily sings and plays guitar.

She has been involved extensively in community organizing and educational development work since the 1980's, especially in low income neighborhoods, designing enrichment programs that bring together people with diverse cultural and generational backgrounds as a means to strengthen their communities. She received a master's degree in education from Harvard in 1990, and continues to do strategic planning and management consulting for non-profits in the Boston area.

In the early 1990's her two solo CD's included numerous original compositions as well as several traditional Jewish songs. In 1997 she teamed up with Minister LeRoix Hampton of the New Covenant Christian Church in Mattapan, MA, to provide music for an Anti-Defamation League community Seder, and from that grew her third CD, *The Freedom Music Project*, celebrating the freedom songs of Passover and the civil rights movement. The topic of network TV features and NPR's *All Things Considered*, this eighteen voice choir of African-American and Jewish youth behind the sonorous lead singing of Smilow beautifully combines the two traditions, just as she has successfully melded her Jewish contemporary songs with the pursuit of social justice.

After hearing the group's exceptional, upbeat version of Passover's *Chad Gadya*, the Seder will simply never be the same for me. Similarly, Smilow's powerful voice rejoices and haunts on *Wade in the Water*, and *Oh Freedom*, both traditional spirituals sung as rallying calls during the turbulent civil rights era. *One Small Step*, written by Smilow, tells the story from the Midrash about Nachshon ben Aminidav, one of the slaves fleeing Pharaoh's army who courageously battles the rising tide of the Red Sea. By taking that last step and achieving his freedom he helps others do the same.

Q: What is your goal in doing this work?

Smilow: My goal now is to encourage the Jewish community to remain involved in community-wide problem solving. It's all part of *Tikkun Olam*, helping to heal the world---but we have to go outside our houses of worship and take our faith to the street. It is critically important to gather winter coats and cans of food inside the shul lobby and give them to charity, and have a "dialogue on relations" with someone opposite of us. But this is not enough. We need to serve meals to the homeless, visit the elderly, invite people from other communities into our homes and synagogues to do things together, sing, dance, build relationships based on areas of commonality rather than focusing on the differences that keep us apart. This is how we can build community and make a positive impact on our society.

Q: How does this relate to the civil rights movement?

Smilow: One of the reasons the civil rights movement in the 1960's was so successful was because Blacks and Jews faced a common enemy and joined forces to take action, and made a real impact. Music played a significant role in uniting people then, and I think the same thing can happen now. Today, however, the issues are not so easy to define. I think there is a lot of poverty that we rarely hear about, there is a huge middle class in this country that has become complacent, and the disparity between the rich and the poor is growing. These are large, tough issues to deal with, but I hope to draw Blacks and Jews into working more together once again.

With her extraordinary crystal clear voice, Smilow celebrates her Judaism by bringing people together in song. She has been called a Jewish combination of Joan Baez and Pete Seeger. It simply does not get much better than that.

Peri Smilow lives in South Orange, NJ, with her New York TV Sportscaster husband, Budd Mishkin [also a folksinger], and their young daughter Allie.

Cantor Janice Roger and the Chai Notes and Congregational Choirs of Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation will perform with Ms. Smilow Saturday, February 5, 4 pm, at IHC. Tickets are available at the door for \$7; \$5 for 12 and younger. For more information call 255-6647.