

# Synagogue, church join to celebrate freedom



by Debra Rubin

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For a Jewish musician, singing about freedom in a concert being held close to Passover is a no-brainer.

For Peri Smilow, singing songs of liberation with an African-American Baptist choir seems equally appropriate.

On Saturday evening, March 31, the singer, songwriter, educator, and community organizer will appear at Temple Shalom in Aberdeen in a concert that will also feature the synagogue's adult and junior choirs and the choir of the New Light Baptist Church in Cliffwood.

Smilow — who has released several CDs and has toured throughout the United States, Canada, England, and Israel — is renowned for her ability to transmit Jewish concepts through music.

The concert at Temple Shalom — Freedom Music of Passover and the Civil Rights Movement — is part of Smilow's Freedom Music Project, whose aim is to bring together people with a shared history of oppression.

“Peri is a good friend of mine and one of my favorite



Singer-songwriter Peri Smilow forges ties between Jews and African-Americans through her Freedom Music Project.

## If you go

**What:** Freedom Music of Passover and the Civil Rights Movement

**Who:** Singer-songwriter Peri Smilow, Temple Shalom and New Light Baptist Church choirs

**Where:** Temple Shalom, Aberdeen

**When:** Saturday, March 31, 7:30 p.m.

**Cost:** \$15, \$5 for children, \$10/\$3 for members, free for Temple Shalom religious and nursery school students

**Contact:** Margo at [biomusicmm@aol.com](mailto:biomusicmm@aol.com) or 732 566-2621

Jewish musicians,” said Cantor Leon Sher, who has been directing the temple’s choir in preparation for the concert, along with regular director Pam Momyer. “Her words and songs bring a lot of *ruach* [spirit] to our choirs. We have started doing some of Peri’s music during our services, and people are loving it.”

Smilow’s determination to bring blacks and Jews together through music is linked to her own family’s commitment to the Civil Rights movement. A South Orange resident who spent most of her childhood in East Brunswick, she lived in New Orleans in the early ’60s, when she was a small child. Smilow said her parents were appalled by the segregation and racism they witnessed.

“My awareness of the differences between whites and blacks in this country began early,” she said in a phone interview with *NJJN*. She said she even remembers her parents’ insisting that she drink from “colored only” water fountains.

Later, in New Jersey, her parents volunteered as “testers” for black families who were told that houses they were interested in were no longer on the market. If a tester was invited to see a house, Smilow explained, the sellers’ bigotry was exposed.

About a dozen years ago, while living in Boston, Smilow served as chair of an annual black-Jewish seder being held that year at one of the largest black churches in New England. After the church’s minister had dinner in her home, she said, “he thanked me profusely and said something surprising, that in almost 20 years as a pastor in Boston he had never before been invited to a white person’s home.”

The two collaborated on a presentation at that seder, which drew about 900 community members — half of them black, half Jewish. From that encounter came her album *Peri Smilow and the Freedom Music Project*, exploring the cultural and musical traditions of Jews and African-Americans.

Although the project’s original group has since disbanded, its central goals — “to bring our communities together along the common theme of music and using music for change” — haven’t changed.

When Smilow serves as musician-in-residence in communities with a Jewish and black population, she said, she provides “the music, support, and relationship for them to create an event together.”

In the case of Temple Shalom and New Light Baptist Church, however, Smilow is building on an existing relationship. Deacon Michael Wells, the church’s choir director, said the two houses of worship have jointly sponsored interfaith gatherings for the last several years, always having “a fun time.” He said his choir will perform several songs in English and Hebrew.

“We really find out the make-up of someone when we worship with them, and we have found out we are not too different,” said Wells. Singing and praying together, he said, “has brought us to a greater fellowship with one another.”

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## Reader Discussion

### Comments

E

March 27, 2012

This is a wonderful idea!! Happy Pesach.

Peri

March 29, 2012

I'm so proud of this upcoming concert! It's going to be memorable! Hope to see lots of you there!  
Doing good and doing Jewish all in one!

### Leave a Comment

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