

Composer sees 'Jewish people on one page'

Performer with cross-denominational appeal in East Windsor for Purim



Credit: samglaser.com

Sam Glaser will perform at a Purim concert and Shabbat experience Feb. 26-27 at Rimon/the Mordecai T. Mezrich Center for Jewish Learning in East Windsor.

Jacob Kamaras
THE JEWISH STATE

For Sherry Barsky of East Windsor, being a fan of Sam Glaser goes beyond his music. Glaser, she said, has influenced her to eat kosher and quit smoking.

Barsky, along with Paul and Linda Kessler, is a sponsor for a Purim concert and Shabbat experience with Glaser Feb. 26-27 at Rimon/the Mordecai T. Mezrich Center for Jewish Learning in East Windsor. During a Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education (CAJE) conference 10 years ago, Glaser spotted Barsky — who was reeling from the death of her friend a few days earlier — with a cigarette, and asked her “After what happened to Alice, you’re still smoking?”

After finishing half a carton of leftover cigarettes, Barsky hasn’t smoked since. Six years ago, when

she picked up Glaser from the airport before a concert in Princeton, Barsky made sure Glaser had kosher food and decided it was time for her to eat kosher as well.

“He’s changed my life in a number of ways,” Barsky said.

Cross-denominational professional development gatherings for Jewish teachers, CAJE conferences were the perfect setting for Glaser, who was raised in the Conservative movement, worked at Reform camps, and now leads an Orthodox lifestyle. Half the time playing solo on piano and the other half with an eight-piece band, Glaser performs in 50 cities a year, including shows at Jewish conventions like the General Assembly, Limmud, Central Conference of American Rabbis, Cantors Assembly, Union for Reform Judaism’s Biennial, the Orthodox Union (OU), and Hadassah.

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“It’s really a great joy for me to see all the Jewish people on one page, united, and making music together,” Glaser told *The Jewish State* in a telephone interview from Los Angeles.

Livia Mezrich, founder of Rimon, said the center’s mission of reaching out to various segments of the Jewish community made Glaser a fitting choice for the Purim concert.

“He seems to have a way with people of all different kinds of backgrounds,” she said.

Glaser, 47, began playing piano at age 6 and writing music at age 7, something he said was only natural for someone whose mother sang and played piano and father sang and played trumpet. Glaser’s career started with several secular rock ‘n’ roll albums in the 1980s, but in the 1990s he began to write Jewish music and meet with other Jewish composers. His hit song “Hineni” became an anthem of sorts for Operation Exodus for the rescue of Soviet Jews in 1991.

“I started finding it much more redeeming than playing the night clubs in Los Angeles,” Glaser said of Jewish music. “It felt more lasting and just more satisfying.”

After he started singing about the beauty of Shabbat and prayer, Glaser said he decided to begin observing Shabbat in 1992 so his actions would match his message.

The 1992 CAJE conference at the University of Southern California was Glaser’s first large Jewish audience, and he went on to perform at 16 consecutive CAJE conferences, making sure the timing of the conferences coincided with the release of his new albums.

“It was always a peak experience of my summer,” Glaser said.

At a Hadassah conference, Glaser recalled that he arranged a set for seniors because he was expecting a crowd of “3,000 elderly women,” but when the audience started a conga line and danced on the tables he “threw out the set list and we just rocked the house.”

For an OU conference, Glaser said he gathered 25 cantors from around the country to perform the music of Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach; Glaser was an accompanist for Carlebach at his performances on the West Coast the last few years of his life.

Marsha Garber of Monroe met Glaser on a cruise to the Mexican Riviera in January, when Glaser helped ensure that her son-in-law Eli, who was saying Kaddish for his father, had a minyan. Glaser led Shabbat services on the cruise and even held an impromptu concert after Shabbat, Garber said.

“He was very warm, a people person,” Garber said. “He said ‘whatever you want to hear, just let me know.’”

Barsky uses Glaser’s music to teach 4th and 5th graders prayer at The Jewish Center in Princeton, and her students “adore him,” she said.

“He’s a marvelous teacher, a marvelous entertainer,” Barsky said.

Glaser said New Jersey is a “great market” for him because every small town has a few different synagogues that are active and cohesive. During Shabbaton weekends, Glaser said he intersperses the services he leads with comments on “kavanot,” things to focus on while praying. He also leads spirituality oriented Torah workshops.

On Friday, Feb. 26 at 6 p.m., Glaser will lead Kabbalat Shabbat at Rimon followed by dinner and singing. On Saturday morning, Glaser will lead services at 9 a.m. followed by a Kiddush. Megillah reading is 7:30 p.m. on Saturday night, followed by Glaser’s concert and refreshments.

Admission for the entire weekend, including the concert, is \$25 for adults, \$7.50 for children under 12, and free for children under 5. For just the concert, admission is \$15 for adults, \$12 for seniors and students, \$5 for children under 12, free for children under 5, and \$35 maximum per family.

Rimon is located at 483 Dutch Neck Road, East Windsor. For reservations, call (609) 918-9750 or email info@rimoncenter.org. Seating is limited, so please reserve before Feb. 24.