

ST. LOUIS JEWISH LIGHT

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Associate Editor

Folk singers, as lyrical storytellers, rarely begin a tale with the words once upon a time. Instead, they allow the language, cadence, rhythm and tone to punctuate and express the message and moral of the song.

Jewish artists, in particular, happen to be well-versed in the trade, drawing upon their rich history and traditional heritage to illustrate, communicate and convey meaning. Artists like Debbie Friedman, Judy Caplan Ginsburgh and Robyn Helzner have influenced the course of Jewish music. In many ways, they have become the modern Pied Pipers, luring audiences through melodies and harmonies, educating both the secular and religious worlds within the journey of song, and most important, elevating Jewish music to levels beyond liturgical practice.

Of all the artists, Helzner perhaps brings the most seasoned background and soulful approach to the scene. As a cantor, international performer, guitarist and teacher, she interprets, enlivenes, inspires and sells the music. Through her extensive repertoire of English, Hebrew, Yiddish, Ladino, Russian and a few other languages, she transcends geographical barriers, revealing the universal chord within the language of music.

"It's about narrating stories through song, and hopefully coming away with a piece of Jewish content," she noted. Guitar in hand, Helzner opens the channels of communication by tapping into personal lines of spirituality in an accessible and entrancing manner consistent with the tone of the folk movement.

A "natural" who began performing at the age of 8, Helzner received formal training at Northwestern University in both music and theater. But the reactions of audiences worldwide have shaped her talent more than any particular teacher. And hearts seem to awaken to the Washington-based folk singer, whose pipes bring more than just a vocal flair to the music.

Helzner has that special gift. She provides a dose of Jewish culture – a spiritual elixir sometimes absent from many communities. The Far East is one of her many concentrated regions. And to the approximately 3,000 Jews who live in Hong Kong, Helzner is the link that keeps the mostly transplanted English-speaking Westerners connected to Judaism.

The former Soviet Union is another Helzner hotspot, and probably her favorite. In Moscow and Leningrad, the auditoriums and concert halls would be packed to capacity with audiences eager to take in the culture "with a hunger for Judaism," she explained. "It was so awesome giving public performances and watching Russian Jews proudly display their identity. It's a far cry from years ago," said Helzner, "when



**Members of the Robyn Helzner Trio (left to right)
Dov Weitman, Robyn Helzner and Matt Holsen.**

religious celebration was confined to the quarters of an underground basement."

Helzner will rein in from the four corners of the globe to perform her infectious form of Jewish expression with the Robyn Helzner Trio on December 6-7, at Congregation B'nai Amoona.