

North Suburban Synagogue Beth El brings collegiate Jewish a capella groups together

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Hannah Caplan (left) and another member of the MeshugaNotes, the a capella group from The Ohio State University performs at Perfect Pitch 2 Saturday, Jan. 28 at North Shore Synagogue Beth El in Highland Park. Erin Yarnall/22nd Century Media

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Growing up for Ben Tisser, the hazzan of North Suburban Synagogue Beth El, involved communal singing and enjoying the company of others without thoughts of technology. This is something he tried to recapture while organizing Perfect Pitch 2, the second annual Jewish collegiate a capella concert hosted by the synagogue.

The concert featured five collegiate groups — Jewop from the University of WisconsinMadison, Staam from Washington University in St. Louis, Ketzev from Johns Hopkins University, MeshugaNotes from The Ohio State University and Kaskeset from Binghamton University. The groups performed a variety of songs, ranging from the Backstreet Boys to traditional Jewish music performed in Hebrew.

The groups were hosted for the weekend by families who attend North Shore Synagogue Beth El, and Tisser hoped that their performances will influence young people in the congregation to become involved in Jewish life.

“It’s another gateway that will reach out to the Jewish youth population that will hopefully give them one more very positive association about Jewish activities,” Tisser said.

For some of the singers, including Tamar Feldman, a member of Kaskeset, the a capella programs at their colleges played a role in where they decided to go to school, and they hope that high school students attending this concert are influenced in their college choices by seeing the role that Jewish a capella plays on so many college campuses.

“I was like, ‘There’s a Wegmans, there’s a great Jewish community and there’s nine a capella groups,’” Feldman said about deciding factors when choosing a college.

The groups appreciated the fact that five of the 43 Jewish collegiate a capella groups were represented at the concert, and were able to bond with the other groups based on their shared niche interests.

“It’s a very niche community in that fact that it’s Jewish collegiate a capella,” Max Hersh, a member of Kaskeset said.

“We went to New York City last year, but we’ve never really done anything with any other Jewish a capella groups,” Hannah Caplan, a member of The Ohio State University’s MeshugaNotes said. “Ohio State is a huge school and there’s like 15 a capella groups, but we’re the only Jewish one. So, we kind of do our own thing and we don’t really know a lot of other Jewish singers, so this has been the coolest thing that I’ve done in my four years.”

Tisser partnered with the Jewish United Fund of Metropolitan Chicago and Hillels of Illinois, and Rabbi Vernon Kurtz and John Lowenstein, the executive director of Hillels of Illinois, spoke in between groups about the importance of getting students involved in Jewish life on college campuses.

“We further enhanced the program by highlighting groups not just for entertainment value and talent, but we’re hoping to highlight the Jewish experience on campus,” Tisser said.

While the concert has proven itself to be a popular event — parking was so limited that many attendees parked on side streets multiple blocks away from the synagogue — Tisser is expanding on the format in 2018. He announced at the event that he is organizing a *ilu finu*, a songwriting contest for groups to do original iterations “for the Shabbat liturgy,” according to Tisser. It will culminate in another a capella concert with cash prizes for the top submissions.

Despite future plans, this year’s event ultimately served to be what Tisser intended — an opportunity to bring the community, and extended community of Jewish collegiate a capella groups, together.

“Music is something that’s so powerful,” Hersh said. “My dad always has a quote that says, ‘Music is a universal language, and with it’s soul speaks to soul.’ Really, that’s all it is. It’s just a bunch of souls connecting together through music. Whether you have zero Jewish background, or I come from a pretty religious bubble, we all come together regardless of what our backgrounds are when we can do something like this.”