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A marriage of spirit and song

CD showcases a legendary Holy Land rabbi

By Jules Becker

"Ha'Orot: The Lights of Rav Kook" on Tzaddik Records, 2009.

It's not your typical pairing: a Framingham-raised musician/rabbi teams up with the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of the land of Israel – 74 years after his death.

In the CD "Ha'Orot: The Lights of Rav Kook," Rabbi Greg Wall sets English translations of Rabbi Kook's poetry to music.

Wall was in Boston earlier this month to accompany the Israeli singer Dudu Fisher at Symphony Hall. He has been a featured soloist with Neshama Carlebach and the Klezmatics; composed works for the Carolyn Dorfman Dance Company; and formed the band Hasidic New Wave with Frank London of the Klezmatics.

Wall, 49, who calls himself "eclectic Orthodox," grew up in "a secular Jewish home" and engaged in "meaningless Reform dabbling" while he prepared for his bar mitzvah. Music was his first passion. Playing clarinet, saxophone and flute, he studied at the New England Conservatory of Music and then moved to New York in the early '80s. That was when he began "a serious study of the arts and a serious inquiry into Judaism."

He performed at Chassidic weddings "deep in the bowels of

Brooklyn," while receiving semichot (rabbinic ordinations) from Kollel Zalman Nechemiah Goldberg and Yeshivat Pirchei Shoshanim. "As a spiritual seeker," Wall said he found that immersing himself in Jewish tradition "made a lasting impact on how I live my life and how I choose to look at the world as an artist."

Wall was particularly influenced by the writing and life of Rav Kook (1865-1935), a Latvian-born rabbi who became a key religious figure while Palestine was under British rule. He founded a yeshiva in Jerusalem and, although a master of Halacha, forged ties with a wide range of Jews. Wall said that as he dug deeper, he learned that Kook "was not only a serious rabbi but also a serious artist."

Wall's interest in Kook took a professional turn in 2007, when Wall performed at the Ashkenaz Festival in Toronto. In the audience was Itzhak Marmorstein, a Vancouver rabbi and expert on Kook's writings. Marmorstein approached Wall and announced: "Rabbi Kook needs you."

Wall took up the challenge,

writing jazzy accompaniments to Marmorstein's English translations of Kook's spiritual poetry.

The collaboration only deepened Wall's appreciation for Kook's approach to art and religion. "Rav Kook teaches we cannot be too absorbed in the technical at the expense of the creative," Wall said, adding that he admired Kook's embrace of all Jews, regardless of their degree of piety. Kook's theology "transcends factionalism," he said.

Besides Kook, Wall cited another influence on his music: John Coltrane, a pioneer in blending spirit and jazz.

Wall recorded "Ha'Orot" with his new band, Later Prophets, on Tzaddik Records. On the CD, he displays his musical versatility, performing on tenor sax, soprano sax, clarinet and moseno (a bamboo flute). Other highlights include solo stretches by pianist Shai Bachar, bassist David Richards and drummer Aaron Alexander.

Wall's fusion of religion and music does not stop with concerts and recording. Just appointed the new rabbi at the 100-family 6th Street Community Synagogue in New York's East Village, he plans to infuse Sabbath services with "singing, foot stomping and hand clapping."

What makes Tanta Tilly tweet?

The winning, whimsical world of Joyce Creiger

By Dawn Swann
Special to the Advocate

"It's morning time, everyone's fine, a busy day in store, building strength in my core, hoping for some fun, plan a walk in the sun. hugs..." – tweets Tanta Tilly.

When Joyce Creiger, the human behind the alliterative aunt, isn't tweeting, she is selling real estate and writing children's stories.

The first in her series of Tanta Tilly's Travel Tales debuted this year: "Izzy Iguana Is Invited to Israel."

Creiger, 69, grew up in Summit, N.J., the daughter of a Jersey native and a Belgian mother. Her mother spoke eight languages, but unfortunately English wasn't her strongest. Creiger made sure her own three daughters weren't starved for stories. She filled their imaginations with tales of silly animals jumping rope in the house and riding bikes down the highway.

Today, Creiger lives next to a sprawling horse farm in Bedford with boyfriend Ron Kramer, whom she describes with characteristic understatement as "the most delicious man in the world." Together, they travel the world – often joined by some of their combined nine grandchildren – as they scope out locations for books and brainstorm plots.

Creiger recalls one spontaneous game of round-robin storytelling with the gang at a restaurant. One child started with a monkey. The next had him jump off a



Creiger's characters have animal magnetism.

train. As the furry little guy found himself wandering a darkened city, Creiger scribbled furiously on the back of a paper placemat. When the story was finished and the placemats were full, she copied, laminated and distributed the book to the kids.

Creiger started writing a decade ago when she took a memoir class at Brandeis. She dug out a series of diaries she'd kept as a young woman, dusted off the memories and crafted vignettes. She hasn't stopped writing since.

Creiger has cultivated another art, that of contentment. She stays busy with the things that she loves to do. As everybody's aunt on Twitter, she spreads her cheer, with messages like: "Dance today, Dance a lot – grab the music and dance with your tot. Smile today Smile a lot, Smile big for your tot."

Creiger asked one of her daugh-

ters, "If I die tomorrow, what message would you remember?"

She expected to hear something practical, like eat well, rest and get plenty of exercise.

Instead, the daughter responded: "Your faith." Creiger said that made her eyes well with tears.

"Every single day, 10 times a day, I say thank you to G-d for all the little miracles," she said.

G-d isn't the only heavenly body Creiger communes with. "I go to Pluto frequently," she said of her imaginative wanderings.

The other day, driving down the road with her boyfriend, she stretched her arms out as if in flight.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Shhh," she said. "I'm flying over the Empire State Building. I'm trying to find a place to land."

You see, Creiger was acting out a new book. It's about a bird from Philadelphia who flies to New York.

As for Izzy the Iguana, he may appear again. But mostly in a cameo role in his friends books – creative creatures like Sandra Snail, Derek the Deer and perhaps even Benjamin Beaver, whose home is – where else? – Boston.

Follow Creiger at www.twitter.com/tantatilly or visit her at www.tantatilly.com. Creiger will be among children's writers who will read at Story Salad, Nov. 15, 1:30-3 p.m. as part of the Boston Jewish Book Festival at the JCC in Newton.