

# JEWISH EXPONENT

— WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH IN PHILADELPHIA —

## Power of Words, Faith Drive Benj Pasek to Musical Success, Including Golden Globe

By **Jon Marks** - January 25, 2017



*Benj Pasek and Justin Paul. Photo by Dirty Sugar*

Maybe we shouldn't be surprised the former preschool king of Shabbat has become one of the kings of both Broadway and Hollywood.

After all, from the time he was a little boy, Benj Pasek always seemed to understand the power of words and realize how music reaches into our souls.

Now that he's becoming the talk of two towns doing it for a living — teaming with Justin Paul to write the lyrics to the Golden Globe-winning song "City of Stars" from *La La Land*, along with the Broadway hit musical *Dear Evan Hansen* — he sees it as simply the culmination of a lifelong pursuit.

"I wrote songs beginning at 9, then started to write at the piano around 12 and did the Philly Songwriter's Project when I was 15," recalled the 31-year-old Ardmore native, who's taking all the accolades — including two Oscar nominations for original song — in stride. "So getting to write and work in theater and tell stories for a living is something I always wanted to do.

"Getting to explore character and write about things that interest me has always been exciting. I also always loved to sing, so that was my gateway into learning how music has this amazing ability to provide emotion. It's the universal language.

"If you can use a universal language, you're able to tell the story in a beautiful way, because the emotion is a part of the story and you're giving people a sense of how to feel. I've always viewed it as a wonderful way to communicate, and I'm thrilled I get to wake up and do it every day."

He's also thrilled he'll have an opportunity to do it in his own backyard when Pasek and Ben Platt, star of *Dear Evan Hansen*, headline JEVS Human Services' 75th Anniversary Gala at the Hyatt at the Bellevue on March 27. And that's because not only will he be performing before family and friends, but because JEVS holds a special place in his and his family's heart.

"Judaism is definitely a part of my identity and my life," said Pasek, who's in the midst of filming *The Greatest Showman*, his and Paul's musical about the life of P.T. Barnum, starring Hugh Jackman. "Social activism is something I care a lot about, and I inherited from my wonderfully politically conscious mom and dad. I remember my dad being involved with JEVS for a really long time and attending a JEVS awards presentation.

“That stuff makes a difference when you’re a kid. My family has been a part of JEVS and feels a responsibility to give back to the community, conscious socially and to really practice the idea of tikkun olam. That’s a goal which is good for everyone and something I strive to do more of as I get older.”

The openly gay Pasek is willing to disrupt a hectic schedule where he “hasn’t had a day off in four months” for this occasion because of his connection to his religion. That goes back to preschool and has been strengthened through Judaism’s inclusiveness toward the LGBTQ community.

“There’s a picture of myself at Beth Hillel preschool when I was 3 or 4,” said Pasek, who’s always been called Benj in part because of his father’s admiration for Benjamin Franklin and to separate him from a number of other kids in his class named Ben. “One kid was anointed as the Shabbat king of the week, and that week it was me.

“I took some Jewish classes after that to supplement my Hebrew school education, and I’m relatively active today with an organization for young Jews called Reboot. Every religion has different views about inclusiveness and equality, but Jews have been ‘the other’ throughout history.

“People sometimes question whether or not Judaism involves young people. The answer is really evident that if you make it something inclusive where young people want to be a part of it, then it will survive. If you don’t, it won’t. My attitude towards Judaism should be one and the same.”

That comes not only from his Jewish teachings but going to school at the Quaker Friends’ Central School, where the suicide of a classmate became the inspiration for *Dear Evan Hansen*.

“My school had a real healthy percentage of Jewish students,” Pasek said. “The Quaker religion has a basic commitment to social justice.

"A lot of what they taught and my Jewish education was about empathy-building. Now it's my job to practice empathy and put myself in other characters' shoes and try to understand 'the other.' But often I feel like the other, so I'm really appreciative of having that combination."

From there, it was off to Michigan, where he met Justin Paul and began collaborating. To all around them it was magic.

"Benj was always swimming with ideas, like a creative force," said his college friend Etai Benson, now starring with the national touring company of *An American in Paris*. He recently joined forces with Pasek to put together a special Shabbat event in New York geared toward the younger generation.

"I took creative writing with him and got to see some of his work, his way with language, so his success is no shock to me. I knew Justin, too. You could already see they were on that path of collaborating. Here were these two college students, so unpretentious, really cool theater nerds creating this incredible work."

That work may well lead to an Oscar, a Tony or both.

"Being recognized for your work is really a thrilling thing," said Pasek, who won't come alone on Oscar night, which he did for the Golden Globes while Facebooking with his family back home. "Because you get to be part of a community you always dreamed of being a part of."

"It's really inspiring to be in that room with actors and actresses you've always admired and producers who've made some of your favorite films. But any time someone believes in you — whether that's a teacher empowering you to get onstage for the first time or any award telling you they have confidence in your ability — that pushes you to keep going, holds you to a high standard and means you want to rise to the challenge."

Contact: [jmarks@jewishexponent.com](mailto:jmarks@jewishexponent.com); 215-832-0729