

Parashat B'Shalach and Remembering Debbie Friedman – 2011

The first conference on Judaism that I ever attended was a conference on Jewish feminism that was held around 1991 at the University of Judaism. I had recently transferred to the UJ and begun studying Hebrew and Jewish texts in earnest but I had never worn a tallit, had barely even heard of tefillin, and quite simply didn't know what Jewish feminism even meant. I sat there, one of the youngest participants, having been unable to convince my friends from school to attend the conference right on site and listened to the keynote speaker. I don't remember her name or anything she said. But as the keynote speaker finished she invited us to welcome another woman to the microphone, a woman who would help us find the "ruach" the spirit of the event. She introduced her as a Jewish folk singer by the name of Debbie Friedman. Many women clapped wildly at hearing her name, but I had never heard of her and now my curiosity was piqued. I remember vividly watching her be wheeled up to the microphone. At the microphone she stood up, picked up her guitar, and began to sing – B'ruchot ha-ba'ot, tachat kanfei ha-Shechinah, b'ruchim ha-baim tachat kanfei ha-Shechinah, May you be blessed beneath the wings of Schechinah, be blessed with love be blessed with peace. Though her body was weak, her voice was strong, and while she was certainly no opera singer, the quality and sincerity in her voice moved me deeply. By the time she had finished, after two other songs, I had a lump in my throat and tears of joy in my eyes. When she sat back down in her wheelchair I was saddened that she was done, having had a glimpse of the power of her music. I didn't remain sad for long though, because later during the day she came back to participate in a special exercise. We all went outside and stood around a very long sheet of blue paper. We were asked to remember all past hurts, any time that we had felt excluded or marginalized because of our gender. We were told that we were going to take our role back in the life of Judaism, just as Moses' sister Miriam had a distinct role in the Torah. We were going to leave it all behind as Miriam and Moses and all our ancestors had left Egypt behind. We then lifted the blue sheet of paper and shook it, and then all "crossed through" to the other side. When we were finished, Debbie began to play her guitar once again, and all the women present joined in singing and dancing to a song that I had never heard, but quickly came to love. The chorus went: And the women, dancing with their timbrels, followed Miriam as she sang her song, sing a song to the One whom we've exalted, Miriam and the women danced and danced the whole night long. By the time the conference ended, I had tied *tzitzit* for the first time and learned a meditation for putting on a tallit, I knew what Jewish feminism was, and I had purchased three cassette tapes of Debbie Friedman's music.

My enthusiasm for Debbie Friedman's music began that day and grew over the years, as did my admiration for her strength in the face of tremendous physical adversity. Last Shabbat we sang together, as did Jews around the world, the *Misheberach* that she composed and made famous, focusing our thoughts on her. Today we come to shul knowing that while she has physically left this world and moved on to *Olam ha-Ba*, her legacy will continue for generations to come.

It is no exaggeration to say that she single-handedly changed the face of Jewish liturgical and folk music in this country. As Jonathan Mark wrote this week: "To a broken generation, Debbie Friedman delivered a mystical truth: You don't have to be cured to be healed. She, who suffered for so long from elusive, debilitating neurological illnesses that finally took her life Sunday after 59 years, understood, with humor and faith, that she was singing and writing with one foot in

Heaven and the other on a banana peel. It was as if from Heaven, however, that her most ethereal music seemed to come, transforming not only lives but whole denominations. She emerged in the 1970s, as if from a cornfield, from campfires in a Wisconsin summer camp, and an untethered Reform childhood in Minnesota where her parents wouldn't even send her to Hebrew school, relenting only when she begged. Without rabbinic, cantorial or even musical training, Debbie — even in formal settings she was always Debbie — nevertheless did more than anyone to upend the old Western European model of Reform Judaism, with its magisterial formality, organs, operatic cantors, let alone its scientific skepticism about the power of a blessing. She was arguably the most successful composer of Jewish religious music in the American musical vernacular of folk and popular song, and she sang with an unvarnished voice, as simple, yet strong, as her prairie roots."

Mr. Mark continues by saying: "Most singer-songwriters in 1971 aspired to write love songs. Debbie wrote love songs, too, but to God. She even turned the Kaddish (said in the merit of the deceased) into a love song, which, of course, it always was."

Debbie's career began with various cantorial and teaching jobs and then she moved to the Upper West Side in the 1990s. She was more noticed by the media, and more appreciated by the Reform and Conservative seminaries based in New York. In 2007, her acceptance complete, embraced by a new generation of rabbis and cantors, she was appointed to the faculty at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion's School of Sacred Music. "By creating a whole new genre of Jewish music, Debbie was able to reintroduce authentic Jewish spirituality," said Rabbi Daniel Freedlander, vice president of the Union for Reform Judaism, in a statement posted on the movement's website this week. "She wrote melodies that spoke to us, spoke to our intellect, spoke to our emotions." What is heard in Reform synagogues today said Rabbi Friedlander is "in large measure due to the insight, brilliance and influence of Debbie Friedman."

Of course her influence has spread far outside of the Reform movement, with many of her melodies, including the Misheberach, the Havdallah service, Ahavath Olam, the English version of the V'ahavta, and the Mikamocha, sang in many Conservative synagogues and even a few modern Orthodox synagogues. She has influenced two generations of Jews and inspired a wave of Jewish folk singers including Julie Silver, Stacey Beyer, and more. She created the genre of Jewish folk singer and ignited the spark, the Jewish neshamah that was languishing in the souls of many Jews in this country.

In many cultures the day of one's birth is said to teach us great insights into the life of an individual. However, I believe that there is often much to be learned about the day that someone has died. When I give a eulogy I almost always find a link between the Torah portion we are reading that week and the life of the individual who has passed.

This couldn't be more true than for this week and Debbie Friedman, for this week we not only read parashat B'shalach, but the entire Shabbat is designated Shabbat Shirah, the Sabbath of Song. We call this Shabbat Shirah in recognition of the fact that this week we read both the Song of the Sea which Moses and the Israelites sang, and the song and dance that Miriam and the women performed after crossing the Reed Sea to freedom. Nevertheless, its name – Sabbath of Song – is one that is perfect as we remember the most influential Jewish songstress of our time.

In an interview, Debbie Friedman said she once went to shul and realized after she had left that she had sat as a spectator, watching the Cantor sing. She said it felt like going to the gym and having someone else do the workout for you. She left shul knowing she would have to change it, and she did. Because of her, in many places every Shabbat is a Shabbat Shirah, a Sabbath full of song, where we all, rabbi, cantor, congregant, and visitor can join together in praise of God, and to bless one another. Indeed, one of the major changes in American synagogues because of Debbie Friedman is the idea that EVERYONE can and should sing together. This is also appropriate to remember the weekend we read the Song of the Sea, for as many commentators throughout the years have noted, the song is written in the singular. For years rabbis have wondered how this can be? Was it a call and response, where Moses sang and the Israelites sang back? Or was it a second miracle, in which, caught up in the high emotions of the moment, all were inspired with ONE voice, together, to sing simultaneously the same words and praises to God. It is an idea I find very appealing.

With that in mind, I want to end today in a slightly different manner. I would like to end with a song, her song, the one I sang at the conference nearly twenty years ago.

Miriam's Song

by Debbie Friedman

*And the women dancing with their timbrels,
Followed Miriam as she sang her song,
Sing a song to the One whom we've exalted,
Miriam and the women danced and danced the whole night long*

And Miriam was a weaver of unique variety
The tapestry she wove was one which sang our history.
With every strand and every thread she crafted her delight!
A woman touched with spirit, she dances toward the light

*And the women dancing with their timbrels,
Followed Miriam as she sang her song,
Sing a song to the One whom we've exalted,
Miriam and the women danced and danced the whole night long*

When Miriam stood upon the shores and gazed across the sea
The wonder of this miracle she soon came to believe.
Whoever thought the sea would part with an outstretched hand
And we would pass to freedom and march to the promised land!

*And the women dancing with their timbrels,
Followed Miriam as she sang her song,
Sing a song to the One whom we've exalted,
Miriam and the women danced and danced the whole night long*

And Miriam the prophet took her timbrel in her hand,
And all the women followed her just as she had planned,
And Miriam raised her voice in song, she sang with praise and might
We've just lived through a miracle, we're going to dance tonight!!

*And the women dancing with their timbrels,
Followed Miriam as she sang her song,
Sing a song to the One whom we've exalted,
Miriam and the women danced, and danced the whole night long.*

