

Shabbat Parashat B'shalah/Shabbat Shira – The Shabbat of Song
In Memory of Debbie Friedman

Each year, when we come to the *parasha*/Torah portion of B'shalah, we mark what is called "Shabbat Shira"/"The Shabbat of Song." This Shabbat is so named because in the Torah portion itself is found the dramatic "Song of the Sea," the poem that Moses and the Children of Israel recited upon miraculously crossing through the Sea of Reeds to escape the on-coming Egyptian chariots of Pharaoh. In a spontaneous expression of jubilation and gratitude, the Children of Israel burst into song led by Moses and dance led by Miriam. Therefore, this week's *parasha* gives us an organic opportunity to celebrate Judaism's musical tradition each year. Sadly, the Jewish world lost one of the giants of Jewish spiritual and liturgical music this past week, so I take this opportunity to memorialize the great Debbie Friedman z"l in my D'var Torah this week.

When Shabbat ends on Saturday night, Havdalah (the short service for concluding Shabbat) takes place within synagogues, youth groups, homes, camps, and any number of Jewish settings. Very often, when the time for the recitation of the blessings comes along, the uber-famous (at least in the Jewish world) repeating melody of "lai-lai-lai-lai-lai-lai-lai" is the natural musical selection. During the Torah service on Shabbat morning, many congregations often join together for a musical version of the prayer for healing, "*Mi Shebeirakh*." Unbeknownst to many, both of these compositions are written by Debbie Friedman z"l.

I was fortunate enough to meet and hear Debbie Friedman z"l in person a number of times. The charismatic power of her music and personality were palpable. There have been very few individuals in this generation who have been able to make it possible for others to deeply and meaningfully connect to Jewish prayer across the spectrum of Jewish communities like Debbie Friedman did. She truly was a unique individual with singular gifts. In his written eulogy, Dr. Arnold Eisen, Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, poignantly described the roles and impact that Debbie Friedman z"l had in her life, which will surely last long into the future:

"Cantorial soloist, music director, teacher, composer, performer, healer, friend: all of these titles celebrate Debbie Friedman. Some will justly measure her success by the fact that she released over 20 albums and sold out shows at Carnegie Hall and hundreds of cities around the world. Others, touched, uplifted, or healed by her music, know that in these ways, too, her contributions to the Jewish people will outlive her. She forms a crucial part of the continuity that joins this generation of Jews to our ancestors and to our descendants in the Jewish community of the future..."

For Shabbat Shira this week, the Jewish community will be remembering Debbie Friedman z"l. If you know of her music, then you may wish to sing one of her tunes to honor her memory. If not, you may wish to look her up on iTunes and listen to some samples of her beautiful work. She will be sorely missed and may her memory always be for a blessing.

Shabbat Shalom!