B'shalah 5771 - "*Together They Sang as One -- In Memory of Debbie Friedman*"

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This particular Shabbat is known throughout the Jewish world as *Shabbat Shira*, the Sabbath of Song. It's name takes its cue from today's Torah reading which includes *Shirat Hayam*, the Song of the Sea, the triumphant ode our ancestors sang after crossing the Sea of Reeds and escaping the clutches of the Egyptians.

There are, of course, other songs in *TaNaKh*, the Hebrew Bible. But the Song of the Sea is the grand-daddy of them all, the very first collective hymn sung by our ancestors at the dawn of Jewish people-hood. *Shirat Hayam* was so esteemed that it has been a part of Jewish worship for a very long time. In the time of the Second Temple more than 2,000 years ago, a choir of Levites sang the Song of the Sea as an accompaniment to the Shabbat afternoon sacrifice. After the Temple's destruction, Jews began to include the passage in their daily worship as well. The Song may not have the same central significance for us as does the *Sh'ma*, but its inclusion in our worship is as old as the *Sh'ma*, and thus of even greater antiquity than the *Amidah* prayer. I would wager that most of us know the verse embedded in morning and evening worship, "מִי כָמֹכָה בָּאֵלִם ה', מִי כָּמֹכָה נֶאְדָּר בַּקֹּדֶשׁ, נוֹרָא תְהִלֹּת, עֹשֵׂה פֶלֶא -- Who is like You, O Lord, among the mighty? Who is like You, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, working wonders?" (*Exodus* 15:11). Clearly, the Song of the Sea is a major league prayer by any definition.

You might expect that such a beloved prayer would be filled with moving images of a loving and nurturing God. Instead, it is quite violent, depicting God as a warrior, a smasher of enemies. Listen to a sampling of the lyrics, which I'll sing in English to a pleasant melody: "Pharaoh's chariots and his army He has cast into the sea, his officers are drowned in the Sea of Reeds. The Lord is a warrior, the Lord is His name. In Your great triumph You break Your enemies, You send forth Your fury it consumes them like straw, they sank like lead in the majestic waters." This is fire and brimstone, gleeful joy at the downfall of an adversary. If you feel some discomfort at the less than altruistic message, know that you aren't alone.

Please don't get me wrong . . . I'm not imposing 21st-century moral sensibilities on our ancestors; they had plenty of reason to rejoice at the defeat of their tormentors. The rabbis teach that as the Egyptians drowned, God silenced the angels on high who wanted to offer songs of tribute; the Eternal didn't want the heavenly hosts to rejoice at the death of human beings . . . but tellingly, the Almighty did not seek to stop the Israelites from singing -- having suffered at the hands of the Egyptians, it was only natural for them to rejoice at the demise of their oppressors. Even the way the song appears in the Torah scroll reminds us of this -- the words are written in staggered fashion to resemble bricks stacked upon one another -- as a visual cue of the cruel and harsh slavery our ancestors endured.

But is there a place for this song in *our* lives? Maybe our ancestors were justified in singing it, but are we, living as we do in an era of enormous religious violence? I believe the answer is "yes," but to explain, I'll need to switch gears.

This past week we lost one of the treasures of contemporary Jewish music as composer and singer Debbie Friedman passed away at the untimely age of 59. In the nearly four decades of her career she recorded 20 albums, whose music ranged from new settings for traditional liturgical pieces to myriad compositions of her own.

The truth is some of Debbie Friedman's songs are, well, a little simplistic; Yet she undeniably touched the hearts of countless Jews. So what was it that made Debbie Friedman so special? As one young Reform *Hazzan* put it, "Her music was a total game changer in terms of bringing out an accessible, openly vulnerable music that just allowed people to unleash their prayers in a way that they hadn't been able to do before." In other words, her music was so precious and vital because *it made us sing*.

In far too many places Jewish worship has traditionally been a spectator sport. Some of it has been due to insufficient knowledge of the liturgy or Hebrew, but frankly, passivity has also been promoted from the *bimah*. The prayer book and the sermon served as librettos for clergy rather than as script for congregant; worshippers were meant to be seen, but not necessarily heard. Without a doubt, the 20th century produced some of the greatest rabbinic orators and cantorial virtuosi . . . but

it also shaped several generations of Jews unprepared for and uncomfortable with active participation from the pew. When *Koltrain* plays look around -- everyone loves the music . . . but how many people are singing, dancing, clapping or even just humming, and how many are just sitting? We love the tunes, but for those who don't participate actively in the experience, is there any difference between a Koltrain service and the same music played at a performance in the auditorium?

The irony, friends, is that we think of Friedman as a contemporary Jewish musician, when, in fact, she exemplifies the most traditional model of all, the model of *Shirat Hayam*, the Song of the Sea. At the moment of redemption all Israel sang together, a swelling chorus of connection that rang from the throat of every Jew, on-key or off, young and old, from Moses to the most humble Israelite. For the first, last and and only time in our history as a people, every single person joined in. Nowhere else in the Torah, nowhere else in the entire Bible, and never again have all our people sang as one. How could we dare *not* include in our worship the one song that all our ancestors sang in unison?

Debbie Friedman knew this in her bones, she knew it in her compositions, and she made us know it, too. Caught up in the exultation of their own redemption, the Israelites could no more help singing than they could help breathing. Here are Friedman's own lyrics describing the event: "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 lived through a miracle, we're going to dance tonight!" You see, when Debbie Friedman got people out in the aisles dancing and singing at a service, she wasn't providing people with a good show; she was connecting them to our ancestors, causing them to re-enact in miniature what happened on the shore of a windswept sea thousands of years ago.

Yet in all of this there's a deep irony. For in celebrating the one song that an entire generation sang together, we are clueless to the melody they used. There are no recordings from thousands of years ago, no musical scores to rely on. We have the lyrics, yes, the words we have, but not the music.

But that's how it's supposed to be. Consider the words of the daily morning liturgy, recited just before the *Amidah*: מֹשֶׁה וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְךָ עָנוּ שִׁירָה בְּשִׂמְחָה רַבָּה, וְאָמְרוּ כֻלָּם - Moses and the people Israel joyfully sang this song to You, and they all said . . ." "Said?" Shouldn't the line read "sung"? The *siddur* is trying to remind us that we can no longer hear their music. The tradition of the words, yes, that we carry with us . . . in the same way that in this morning's Torah portion the Israelites carried the bones of Joseph with them when they left Egypt. We carry the past with us: the words, the liturgy, the traditions. It is that which connects us to our past; it is our anchor, our birthright, our legacy to the future. But the people did not only carry Joseph's bones with them, for the Israelite women of that time and place also brought timbrels to accompany their joyous singing, and in so doing, they made God's promise to Israel and Israel's promise to Joseph come alive.

Until we sing or hum, until we overcome the sense that the music is intended for someone else -- that it belongs to the Cantor, to the Choir, to the person who sings on-key, to the individual in front or behind us -- we can only carry Joseph's bones in silence. When the prayer book tells us that Moses and Israel sang a *shira hadasha,* it is not speaking to the past alone, it is talking to us -- to transform the spoken words of tradition into a love song for God by setting them to the music of our hearts and souls, our longing and pain, our joy and wonder.

Folks, there is no such thing as vicarious prayer; to experience meaning requires that we make ourselves vulnerable. We mistake having an open *siddur* with having an open heart, and they are far from synonymous. This past week at a rabbinic retreat in Maryland, I felt God's presence as our ancestors experienced miraculous redemption at the Sea, when, with 60 other rabbis, each and everyone of us sang *Shirat Hayam,* the Song of the Sea. Some of us had beautiful voices, some of us sang like broken fog-horns, but there was a collective power to the sound of every person joining in. Listening to those swelling voice sing what was undeniably a melody different from anything our ancestors might have possibly sang, our *shira hadasha,* our new song merged with the music of generations past and future. In a minute, Hazzan Holzer will lead us in Debbie Friedman's composition, *Miriam's Song* -- yes, the melody and the copyright belongs to the songwriter's estate, but the music in the deepest sense can belong to all of us, past, present and future. So, as always, you have a choice. Listen in silence to the song of others and enjoy a catchy tune, or be a part of

the song, and in joining your voice to others, hear in your soul the music of a miracle that happened on a distant shore thousands of years ago just a moment ago tomorrow.