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The Ripples of Debbie Friedman:

The Musical Legacy That Shaped a Generation of Jewish Liturgical Composers

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The Ripples of Debbie Friedman

This thesis explores the personal, musical, and spiritual impact Debbie Friedman had on a generation of Jewish liturgical composers, and the ripple effect her inspiring lessons continue to have on the next generation. In studying the vastness of Friedman's impact on the music and lives of those inspired by her, this thesis highlights the many ways her legacy is kept alive in the ever-evolving world of Jewish music. In his article, "Debbie Friedman: A Life Transcribed," musicologist Judah Cohen writes, "Friedman's life leaves an immense, unwritten archive of personal memories and informal recordings…scholars face the challenge of collecting and preserving this archive through creative ethnographical research. Through such a process we can begin to create a transcript of Friedman's life and work, in the hope of understanding more completely a crucial era of social and musical transition."[1]

In order to contribute to this archive, I conducted a range of personal interviews with Jewish composers who were inspired by the lessons they learned from Friedman firsthand. I spoke with students, colleagues, and friends of Friedman to gain insight into the ways her legacy is kept alive through their music and work. Additionally, I studied articles written by scholars on Friedman's life and music, and themes central to her career. I analyzed compositions written by Friedman that model these themes, as well as pieces by composers who were inspired by her. The chapters of this thesis are as follows:

- Introduction: Lech L'cha
- Chapter 1: Accessibility
- Chapter 2: Inclusion
- Chapter 3: Healing
- Chapter 4: Music as Midrash
- Chapter 5: Innovation Interwoven with Tradition
- Conclusion: Go Unto Yourself
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In conducting this research, I hope to contribute to the transcript of Friedman's life and work—one that gives insight into the composer, songleader, performer, teacher and spiritual leader who lives on in the music and hearts of all whom she inspired.

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[1] Judah Cohen, "Debbie Friedman: A Life Transcribed," 261.

With immense gratitude to….

Dr. Gordon Dale

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Elana Arian

Cantor Benjie Ellen Schiller

Julie Silver

Cantor Jack Mendelson

Rabbi Ken Chasen

Cantor Jeff Klepper

Dan Nichols

Cantor Richard Cohn

Shira Kline

Cantor Howard Stahl

Craig Taubman

Cantor Jonathan Comisar

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Cantor Rosalie Will

Cheryl Friedman

Debbie Friedman z’l

“We all take this journey together—a journey into ourselves
and a journey translating ourselves to the world,
and giving of what we are to the world.”
- Debbie Friedman

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Introduction: Lech L'cha

In October of 2007, at thirteen years old, I sat in my childhood bedroom and read the English translation of my Bat Mitzvah Torah portion. These ancient words, which I had learned to chant in Hebrew but did not really understand, finally came to life as I read their translation. I read in that moment the story of *Parshat Lech L'cha*, of God calling on Abraham to go forth—to leave his father's house and the comfort of all he calls home, and go forth to the land God will show him. God tells Abraham that from him will emerge a great nation, yet it's up to Abraham to take that leap of faith and go forth on his journey. All Abraham can do is put his trust and faith in God—and that's exactly what he does.

Reading these words as a thirteen year old kid, at a time when the fear of change and uncertainty were at the forefront of my mind, it felt like this story was exactly what I needed to hear. It was the first time I found myself in Torah, discovering within the text the inspiration, motivation, and call to "go forth" that would come to serve as the motto I turn to whenever I find myself at a crossroads in life. These words of Torah touched my heart, and so it was in this moment, studying for my Bat Mitzvah, that I wrote my first Jewish song, "Lech L'cha."

That same fall, on the other end of the country, Debbie Friedman joined the faculty of the School of Sacred Music on the New York campus of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. She was appointed Instructor in Music in the SSM, where she would teach "Music as Midrash," a course for students to explore the spiritual core of Jewish texts as a source for songs, sermons and study. In the words of President Rabbi David Ellenson, "Debbie Friedman will inspire our students through her creativity

and musical talents, help guide their spiritual and leadership development, and provide them with innovative strategies to transform congregations into communities of learning and meaning."[2] It was a revolutionary move for the SSM to invite Friedman to join the faculty, as she had been a lightning rod for criticism from the cantorial world for many years. Many cantors saw her music as a threat to the traditional music of the synagogue, and some even referred to her as "Haman." However, there was no denying the profound impact Debbie Friedman had on the Reform movement, and Rabbi David Ellenson knew just how invaluable her insight would be in helping shape future clergy. Like Abraham, Friedman took a leap of faith and went forth into the unknown, joining the faculty of the school that would one day be named in her honor, and the place where, across the country, writing my first Jewish song, I had no idea I was headed.

I pinpoint that Bat Mitzvah song as the start of my journey as a Jewish composer—a journey that has been filled with so many blessings—so many Jewish composers who have changed my life and inspired me, just as Friedman inspired them. Like a rock skipped upon water, the ripples of her influence have reached far beyond their initial splash. When we look at the soundscape of today's contemporary Jewish music scene, there is one common denominator among the majority of Jewish liturgical composers: they were all, in some shape or form, inspired by Debbie Friedman. Throughout my research, I have spoken to composers who knew and learned from Friedman firsthand, and have discovered the countless ways her music and lessons have shaped their work. Friedman touched hearts who continue to touch hearts. Though she passed away in 2011, generations of Jewish composers continue to implement lessons

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[2] http://huc.edu/news/2007/06/04/debbie-friedman-joins-faculty-huc-jir

learned from Friedman into their lives everyday, shaping the future of Jewish music as they carry on her legacy and share her vision with the next generation.

Throughout this thesis, I will be exploring several questions in relation to Friedman's inspiring impact on today's Jewish liturgical composers:

1. What are the most important lessons contemporary composers learned from Friedman, and how do these lessons emerge in their music?
2. Has Friedman's compositional approach influenced the songwriting techniques of liturgical composers? If so, how?
3. Has Friedman's influence reached beyond denominations and musical genres? If so, how?
4. How has Friedman's character, in addition to her music, inspired composers?
5. How are composers passing on Friedman's vision to the next generation, and how is her legacy inspiring the next steps on the journey as we look towards the future of Jewish music?

To explore these questions, I have conducted a range of interviews and collected firsthand accounts of composers who shared with me their experience of Debbie Friedman as a friend, colleague, prayer leader, teacher and mentor. Among these composers are Friedman's contemporaries who began writing music around the same time as her, such as Cantor Jeff Klepper, whose forty-year friendship with Friedman undoubtedly shaped his musical journey. I spoke with composers who learned of Friedman as young songleaders, such as Julie Silver, Craig Taubman, and Ken Chasen. As teenagers who learned Friedman's music well before meeting her, they went from a

place of feeling starstruck by Friedman to working closely with her throughout their careers, each considering her a dear friend and colleague. I spoke with cantors and professors in the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (formerly the School of Sacred Music, and renamed after Friedman's passing in 2011.) Cantor Benjie Ellen Schiller, Cantor Jonathan Comisar, Cantor Howard Stahl and Cantor Jack Mendelson spoke of Friedman's influence on their lives at both the college and beyond, and the ways in which her inspiration transcended genres and inspired compositions beyond the folk realm. I spoke with many of the leading voices in contemporary Jewish music today, composers such as Elana Arian, Dan Nichols, Natalie Young and Shira Kline, all of whom experienced Friedman's gracious spirit and encouragement. While Friedman impacted each person individually and on a deeply personal level, there are common threads among the elements of her influence that left a lasting impact on those who knew her. This thesis will display the central themes found throughout my interviews, exploring the ways in which the music of today's Jewish liturgical composers is reflective of Friedman's inspiring legacy.

In addition to demonstrating the findings of my interviews, I will expand upon the themes central to Friedman's work by exploring the extant scholarship on Debbie Friedman by scholars, researchers, and musicologists. Here, I present an analysis of the research offered by Joshua Edelman, Sarah M. Ross, Tanya Sermer, Avi Bar-Eitan, Tina Frühauf, Judah Cohen, and Deborah E. Lipstadt. Each scholar agrees that Freidman was, in more ways than one, a revolutionary force in the world of Jewish music. Like many synagogue musicians before her, Friedman's innovations were not always welcomed or

accepted by those around her, yet they went on to shape the normative soundscape of American Judaism. The works of these scholars offer insight into what made Friedman so unique, groundbreaking, and impactful as a composer, performer, prayer leader, and human being. They explore Friedman's stage presence, compositional approach, performance style, feminist viewpoint, music as midrash, camp background, and passion for communal singing and spiritual togetherness. While each scholar writes about the impact and legacy of Debbie Friedman from a different viewpoint, there are overlapping elements in each of their works. The key findings of each scholar, in addition to how they relate to one another, help to paint a picture of the vastness of Friedman's legacy.

In each chapter of this thesis, I will discuss Friedman's impact on the world of Jewish music through the lens of key aspects of her work that have inspired composers. In chapter one, I will discuss a theme that came up in nearly every conversation I had with composers inspired by Friedman—the theme of accessibility. This was at the root of Friedman's mission as a composer, as she strived to make liturgy accessible to all. Through her music, she gave people a way into the liturgy, drawing in those who had previously felt disconnected and allowing them to find relevance and new meaning in prayer. Accessibility in Friedman's music can be seen through four facets: Her creative English interpretations of liturgy, her ability to write songs that combined Hebrew and English, her desire to take lesser-known texts and give them new meaning for a contemporary liberal Jewish world, and her empowering of the "communal voice" (that is, encouraging and inspiring a congregation to sing together.) Each of these elements, central to Friedman's music, have inspired composers to approach Jewish music from a place of accessibility. In the words of Friedman, music that people can connect to allows

the liturgy "to move out of the synagogue and into life, so that it becomes a part of our lifestyle, so that we can live with our prayers on a daily basis."[3]

In chapter two, I will discuss the theme of inclusion, which played a central role in Friedman's music throughout her career. Friedman gave voice to those who felt left out of Jewish life and leadership, particularly women. As a passionate feminist and groundbreaking leader for Jewish women, she wrote music that gave women a voice in liturgy and Torah. She wrote of female prophets, such as Miriam and Devorah, and included feminine God-language in much of her music, such as the name "*Shechina*" for God. In addition to the inclusion of women's voices in her music, her presence as a female leader in the Jewish world paved the way for many non-male composers who saw her as a model for what was possible.

Friedman made clear that her interest and perspective on Jewish feminism in general emerged from her belief in and activism related to social consciousness. Her passion for social justice, as heard throughout much of her music, left a lasting impact on contemporary composers who carry on her vision of a social justice movement that is all but inseparable from the philosophy of Reform Judaism.

In chapter three, I will discuss one of the most impactful aspects of Friedman's career: the way she brought the concept of healing into prayer. Friedman's creation of healing services, and most notably her musical setting of "Mi Shebeirach," inspired dozens of composers to write their own settings of *Mi Shebeirach* as well as other prayers for healing. Congregations across the world were inspired to make a healing moment a standard part of Shabbat and weekday worship, thanks to the popularization of Friedman's healing services. As someone who experienced health challenges throughout

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[3] Ann Coppel, *A Journey of Spirit*, Ann Coppel Productions, LLC., 2005.

her life, yet continued to travel, perform and find joy in her work, Friedman lived by the belief that while physical healing may not always be possible, spiritual healing can be found within prayer. She acknowledged that everyone needed healing in some way, and that praying together in community could allow people to feel less alone in their struggles. She believed that healing came from acknowledging both pain and joy, and embracing both our gifts and burdens. Much of her healing repertoire models this balance, and ultimately, the hope that joy emerges beyond the pain. Friedman's sensitivity to healing had an impact on countless composers who have since written music inspired by her vision, using their songs to help others discover spiritual healing within Jewish tradition.

In chapter 4, I will discuss Friedman's approach to music as midrash—the idea that every piece of Jewish music that exists is in essence a composer's midrash, or interpretation, of a specific text or prayer. In the same way that rabbis for thousands of years have come up with new interpretations of ancient texts to fit the modern world, composers are doing the same thing by reinterpreting ancient texts and keeping them alive and relevant through new music. Friedman taught that one's interpretation of a text should inspire the music lyrically, melodically, and harmonically, and that a person should never write music simply for the sake of writing a new melody, but because they feel that what they have to say must be heard. Her teaching of writing music in response to text has resonated with a wide range of composers who continue to implement the idea of music as midrash into their own compositional practices.

In chapter five, I will discuss the pushback Friedman faced from the cantorial world. Many cantors saw her music as threatening to the traditional and classical Reform

music of the synagogues. In this chapter, I will discuss how that perception changed over time as cantors came to understand that her intention was not to replace traditional music, but to find ways to make it more accessible. Friedman's desire for innovation interwoven with tradition is one aspect of her work that greatly inspired both cantors and composers to think about synagogue music as a coexistence of multiple musical styles.

In the words of Friedman's friend and fellow composer, Rabbi Danny Freelander, "Her music is one legacy, and the next generation of songwriters and performers and songleaders is the second."[4] Throughout this thesis, I offer the argument that Friedman's influence is undoubtedly present in the music of the Jewish liturgical composers shaping the soundscape of contemporary Jewish music today. As they pass on Friedman's lessons to the next generation of composers, her legacy continues to inspire and shape both the present and future of Jewish music.

[4] Budd Mishkin, interview with Rabbi Dan Freelander, *92NY Talks: Celebrating the Life and Legacy of Debbie Friedman: An Evening of Conversation and Storytelling*, podcast audio, March 25, 2021. https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/92ny-talks/id905112228?i=1000514411796

Chapter 1: Accessibility

While today Friedman's music is an integral part of communal worship in synagogues across the world, her beginnings as a composer came from a feeling of disengagement and marginalization. Struggling to connect with the frontal prayer experience of sitting and listening to the cantor sing, Friedman craved a communal, participatory prayer-experience in which everyone could sing together. In the words of Friedman, "I started writing because I felt left out. I felt so alone when I was sitting in services; the very place that should have cradled me and given me comfort and warmth. How would I ever find a place to belong when I didn't share a common language with my fellow daveners? We were all strangers to one another, but we didn't have to be. There was a common denominator."[5] If Friedman felt this way, she believed, others might be feeling similarly. There was a need Friedman sought to fill, one that would allow congregants to feel less like observers and more like active participants in synagogue services.

Friedman's Beginnings as a Composer

In recounting the story of how she wrote her first Jewish song, Friedman describes sitting on a bus as a teenager in April of 1971, when she started humming a new melody that popped into her head. She had never written a song before and did not feel comfortable writing lyrics, so she opened *The Union Prayer Book*, and turned to an English translation of the *V'ahavta*, "And Thou Shalt Love." Friedman felt that the gentle melody in her head, woven with the message of loving God with all of her heart, soul and

[5] Don Croll, "A 10th Yahrzeit Memory for a Very Special Person," *Texas Jewish Post*, January 27, 2021.

might, suddenly gave new meaning to a prayer she had read time and time again. As Judah Cohen writes in his article, "Sing Unto God: Debbie Friedman and the Changing Sound of Jewish Liturgical Music," Friedman's moment of musical inspiration "tied the innate spontaneity of music to her expressive life, with a Jewish text that matched the music's character."[6] She brought the song to her high school choir director, Joyce Kraulik, with whom she worked closely, and asked if she could teach it by rote to the ensemble. Friedman did not have sheet music, but she used her songleading skills to diligently teach the choir in a repeat-after-me style, singing line by line and adding in harmonies as the teens brought the music to life. As someone who learned how to teach a song from songleaders at a regional Zionist Herzel Camp in Webster, Wisconsin and at Kutz Camp in Warwick, NY., Friedman was used to both learning and teaching music by rote. According to Judah Cohen, the manner in which she wrote and taught "And Thou Shalt Love" characterized her creative process: "receiving a melody at an unexpected moment; bringing it into a public setting by linking it to liturgy; introducing it through oral transmission; and then basing its success on the immediate responses of what were then younger contemporaries."[7] In teaching her song for the very first time, Friedman recounts, "I was stunned when they suddenly put their arms around each other and there were tears rolling down their faces. They were reclaiming this prayer, in a musical language they were able to understand...we were reclaiming something that we hadn't touched, that we had no access to until now."[8]

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[6] Judah Cohen, "Sing Unto God: Debbie Friedman and the Changing Sound of Jewish Liturgical Music." *Contemporary Jewry* 35 (2015): 22.

[7] Cohen, "Sing Unto God," 22.

[8] Croll, "A 10th Yahrzeit."

Sing Unto God

In witnessing the power of "And Thou Shalt Love" among her peers, Friedman was inspired to write an entire service of new musical settings for prayers. By 1972, she composed *Sing Unto God*, a service of eleven musical settings based on texts from *The Union Prayer Book*. She taught the songs to her choir and convinced the cantor to let her premiere the service at her home synagogue, Mt. Zion Temple in St. Paul, Minnesota. According to Judah Cohen, "*Sing Unto God* would set the stage for her entire career. Recorded within weeks as her first album, it largely became her credential; established through the music, but even more so through the process of creating and presenting it as a liturgical experience….[*Sing Unto God*] allowed her to assert her own authority as the recipient of a tradition of Jewish liturgical interpretation."[9] The music of *Sing Unto God* quickly spread to the Reform movement's summer camps and youth groups. As campers and young songleaders across the country learned Friedman's music, they brought it back to their home synagogues, where they hoped the sense of spiritual togetherness they found in singing Friedman's music at camp would reinvigorate synagogue worship. While her music strayed from the traditional Jewish modes and classical Reform repertoire representative of the synagogue, the familiar folk genre, singable melodies and creative, English lyrics mixed with Hebrew allowed congregants to connect with the liturgy in an entirely new and engaging way. By writing music that encouraged communal singing, Friedman created an accessible prayer experience in which people could express their prayers by lifting their voices together. In a 1997 interview with National Public Radio, Friedman remarked, "People need to pray and they need tools

[9] Cohen, "Sing Unto God," 14.

with which they can pray, and we need to make these tools available for them."[10] Friedman's belief that accessible music could create a sense of spiritual togetherness in the synagogue and allow people to connect to prayer remained at the core of her work throughout her life. In Ann Coppel's documentary, *A Journey of Spirit,* Friedman stated, "When you're doing something together as a community, nobody has to stand by him or herself…I just want them to sing because I believe it's life-giving."[11] Her ultimate goal was to help people find a way into the liturgy, a goal that is carried on through the work of contemporary composers who first discovered the power of accessibility through Friedman's music.

Melodic Accessibility

In reflecting on the impact that Friedman's compositions had on her as a teenager, Cantor Benjie Ellen Schiller simply stated, "She was writing for us."[12] Friedman's music spoke to Schiller on a personal level and inspired her as a composer to write music that could help others feel the same sense of connection she discovered through Friedman's music. In reflecting on her influence, Schiller remarked, "It comes back to how I was touched as a teenager and brought in and given a spiritual language. That's what I want to give. That's what I got, and I want to give back. That's what I love, and I think we all need as the world gets harder and harder to deal with."[13] As a classically-trained singer and composer who also grew up as a songleader in the Reform movement, Schiller was

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[10] Robert Siegel, interview with Debbie Friedman, *All Things Considered,* National Public Radio archived audio, September 24, 1997, https://www.npr.org/1997/09/24/1037972/debbie-friedman.

[11] Coppel, *A Journey of Spirit*, 2005.

[12] Benjie Ellen Schiller, interview by Becky Mann, June 30, 2022.

[13] Schiller, 2022.

moved by Friedman's ability to write soaring, beautiful melodies within communal, singable songs. Friedman thought highly of her audiences' musical abilities while inviting them in to participate in the music—a lesson Schiller has brought into her own work.

In reflecting on her setting of "Oseh Shalom," Schiller said that the inspiration to write a prayer for peace came to her during a time in which her husband and son were in Israel during the Lebanon War. Feeling unsettled and filled with worry, her instinct was to write a melody that others could sing along with in order to express their own prayers for peace. Schiller stated, "My true self, in a moment like that, is very connected to what Debbie taught me. In my heart of hearts, that's what I love and care about. That's what I love to write as a composer."[14] At the core of her work, Schiller is drawn to the mix of simplicity and beauty found in Friedman's music that first inspired her as a child—a style she carries on through her own gifted songwriting.

Creative English Interpretations

In addition to the accessibility of Friedman's singable, communal melodies, many of the contemporary composers I spoke with commented on the way Friedman's creative interpretations of liturgy helped people connect to prayer in new ways. Friedman opened the gates of possibilities for composers to write English lyrics that were not simply direct translations of the Hebrew text, but their own interpretations of liturgy for the modern-day. One example of this creativity is found in Friedman's setting of "Tefilat HaDereh," The Traveler's Prayer. The traditional Hebrew text of this prayer, which comes from Babylonian Talmud *Brachot*, is meant to be recited when one embarks on a

[14] Schiller, 2022.

long journey. The prayer asks God to deliver the traveler safely, to protect them from any dangers or perils they may encounter along the way, and to return them in peace.[15] While the original text of this prayer is intended to protect a traveler on a physical journey, Friedman's English interpretation speaks to someone experiencing a life-cycle transition, a moment fraught with possibility and foreboding. Her creative English lyrics are as follows:

> May we be blessed as we go on our way
> May we be guided in peace
> May we be blessed with health and joy
> May this be our blessing, amen.
> May we be sheltered by the wings of peace
> May we be kept in safety and in love,
> May grace and compassion find their way to every soul
> May this be our blessing, amen.

Friedman's setting of "T'filah HaDerech" is often sung in communities in moments of transitions, such as graduations, confirmations, conversions, and retirements, and has inspired people to think about the text of The Traveler's Prayer in a new, modern context. One of Friedman's many gifts was the ability to take a text not typically found within Reform liturgy and give it relevance and purpose through her creative interpretations. In her article, "Sounds of the Synagogue," musicologist Tina Frühauf writes that Friedman's interpretations "meld the heritage of the 'holy language' with the vernacular of American life" as her lyrics "do not translate the Hebrew verbatim in order to maximize the poetic potential of each language and to offer alternative readings, thus enabling deeper engagement."[16] Her songs made it possible for people to understand and

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[15] "Tefilat Haderech, the Traveler's Prayer," My Jewish Learning, May 13, 2019, https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/tefilat-haderekh-the-travelers-prayer/.

[16] Tina Frühauf, "Sounds of the Synagogue," *Experiencing Jewish Music in America: A Listener's Companion*: 5.

connect with the liturgy in ways they might never have discovered if it were not for Friedman's music.

Contemporary Impact

Elana Arian, one of the leading voices in contemporary Jewish music today, commented on the profound impact Friedman's English interpretations have had on her work as a composer. As someone who is often commissioned by synagogues to write settings of particular texts, Arian looks to Friedman's music as inspiration for her own creative interpretations of liturgy. In 2022, she was commissioned by a congregation in Cleveland, Ohio to write a new setting of *T'filat HaDerech* in honor of a cantor's retirement. In reflecting on the process of writing her new piece, Arian remarked, "I was really spending time with Debbie's English…I realized as I was working with it and trying to write my own, that my entire understanding and connection emotionally to this prayer is because of the particular words that Debbie chose, set to this thing, and then I had enough experiences singing her "T'filat HaDerech"—like going off on my Israel trip—that it has that resonance. I don't think I would have any connection to *T'filat HaDerech* if it wasn't for that."[17] By taking a text that was not well-known within the Reform movement and making it relevant through her new interpretation, Friedman's setting of "T'filat HaDerech" served as inspiration for Arian as a contemporary composer. She stated, "I just was so struck by the English and the particular words she interprets that make it feel so powerful and useful, like of course we need a way to honor people on their way and bless them as they go. It serves a very important purpose in ritual and communal life, but that Hebrew is not going to be in peoples mouths and she knew

[17] Elana Arian, interview by Becky Mann, July 6, 2022.

that."[18] Friedman's interpretive lyrics allowed people to develop a connection and understanding of a text beyond the Hebrew. Like Friedman, Arian strives to bring new life to lesser-known texts through her own English interpretations, stating, "I'm constantly in conversation with her in my own writing."[19]

Just as Friedman's "T'filat HaDerech" found new relevance in Reform spaces, Arian's setting of "Nachamu" has achieved a similar purpose. Her composition begins with the Hebrew text from Isaiah 40:1, which translates to "Comfort, oh comfort My people, says God." While the context of this verse in the Book of Isaiah refers to the Israelites in the wilderness and a comforting prophecy about returning to Jerusalem, Arian followed this line of Hebrew in her musical setting with creative English that reinterprets the text in a modern way. Her English lyrics are as follows:

> Comfort us, comfort us in our wilderness
> Comfort us as we struggle to take care of one another.
> Comfort us, comfort us in our wilderness
> Comfort us as we struggle with this world.[20]

Originally written as a piece for *Shabbat Nachamu*, the Shabbat of comfort following *Tishah b'Av*, Arian's setting is sung in synagogues throughout the year as a prayer for comfort and healing. Acknowledging that the world is filled with struggles and challenges, Arian's interpretation brought ancient words of comfort into a modern context. She learned from Friedman "the idea that there's value in spiritual framework, point of view, understanding, and synthesizing the text…suddenly you have a way in that

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[18] Arian, 2022.
[19] Arian, 2022.
[20] Elana Arian, "Nachamu," *The Other Side of Fear*, December 5, 2021. https://music.apple.com/us/album/nachamu/1598264539?i=1598264548

didn't exist before. What Debbie did—and the ripples still—was really the embodiment of that."[21]

Beginning with her desire to feel a sense of belonging in the synagogue, the gift of accessible music that Friedman brought into camps, congregations, and Reform Jewish spaces continues to have an impact on the world of contemporary Jewish music. From the singability of her melodies to the deep connections her creative lyrics have inspired, Friedman opened the gates of possibilities for contemporary composers to write Jewish music through the lens of accessibility. In the words of her fellow composer and lifelong friend, Cantor Jeff Klepper, "Debbie was the one who set the stage for us. She set the pace…making the old sound new."[22]

[21] Arian, 2022.
[22] Jeff Klepper, interview by Becky Mann, July 7, 2022.

Chapter 2: Inclusion

In a 1997 interview on National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*, Robert Siegel remarked to Debbie Friedman, "It really is only very recently that we could speak of Jewish, religious music as being the work of a woman. It just wouldn't have made sense to people a century ago." Without missing a beat, Friedman replied, "I don't think it made much sense to people in this century either."[23] Throughout Friedman's extensive career, she was viewed as an "outsider" in the world of Jewish music. While the idea of a female, guitar-playing, folk-singing Jewish musician was certainly more controversial at the start of Friedman's career than in her later years, her steadfast commitment to Jewish feminism made her a revolutionary figure in the male-dominated world of Jewish music. One cannot speak of Friedman's impact on the Jewish world and the composers she inspired without acknowledging the way she elevated marginalized voices through her music, particularly the voices of women.

Gender-Inclusive Language

One of the ways Friedman incorporated her feminist values into her compositions was through the use of gender-inclusive language, both in English and Hebrew. Friedman first began to notice the importance of gender-inclusive language at a performance at the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education in 1976. While at a soundcheck before the performance, Friedman sang her composition "Not By Might, Not By Power," which originally contained the lyric, "Not by might and not by power, but by spirit alone

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[23] Robert Siegel, interview with Debbie Friedman, *All Things Considered,* National Public Radio archived audio, September 24, 1997, https://www.npr.org/1997/09/24/1037972/debbie-friedman.

shall all men live in peace." Upon hearing Friedman sing this line during the soundcheck, a woman in the back of the room called out, "You have to sing 'all people!'" Friedman realized in that moment that even if she was referencing a biblical quote (in this case, Zechariah 4:6), keeping the text in its masculine form could leave people feeling left out. Recognizing the weight that language held, Friedman changed the lyric that night to "shall we *all* live in peace." Feminist scholar Sarah M. Ross writes in her book, *A Season of Singing: Creating Feminist Jewish Music in the United States*, "The issue of changing traditional, masculine prayer language into the feminine marks a crucial turning point in Friedman's career and repertoire."[24] In reflecting on that soundcheck as an eye-opening moment, Friedman stated, "That was the day I started to have more consciousness about feminism. I thought about how hurt someone could be who felt excluded. I started to write differently."[25]

Friedman's awareness of gender-inclusive language made its way into many of her compositions. In several of her pieces, she refers to God as "*Shechinah*," a feminine Hebrew word that is not found in the Torah, but comes from rabbinic literature and can be translated to "dwelling," denoting the dwelling of the divine presence of God. In her song, "The Angel's Blessing," a contemporary setting of a traditional prayer asking God to send angels to protect us as we sleep, Friedman emphasizes God as *Shechinah* through the chorus of the piece, in which she repeats in a singable refrain, "All around us is Shechinah."[26] Cantor Benjie Ellen Schiller commented on the power of hearing this lyric

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[24] Sarah M. Ross, "Who Sings Unto God? Pioneer Feminist Jewish Singer-Songwriters in the United States," *A Season of Singing: Creating Feminist Jewish Music in the United States* (2016): 46.

[25] Ross, "Who Sings Unto God?" 46.

[26] "The Angel's Blessing," *Sing Unto God: The Debbie Friedman Anthology*, ed. Joel N. Eglash, (Transcontinental Music Publications: 2013): 29.

for the first time, stating, "She said things that were never said before. It redefined sacred expression."[27] Another setting in which Friedman invokes God as *Shechinah* is in her song titled "B'ruchot Habaot," an expression of welcome, conjugated in the plural, feminine-Hebrew form. Friedman composed this setting to welcome a female Jew-by-choice into the Jewish community, choosing to use the feminine conjugation as well as *Shechinah* as the name for God through the lyric, "May you be blessed beneath the wings of *Shechinah*."[28]

Along with the use of feminine-God language, Friedman incorporated gender-inclusive language into her compositions in a number of creative ways. In her setting of "Mi Shebeirach," which is perhaps her most well-known composition, Friedman invokes both the patriarchs and matriarchs through parallel verses that alternate the words *avoteinu* (our fathers) and *imoteinu (*our mothers), straying from the original, patriarchal Hebrew found in the traditional text of this prayer for healing. She also incorporates the word *Mekor* to call on God as the "Source" of blessing, (*"Mekor habrachah avoteinu/imoteinu,*") a word often employed in newly-composed feminist liturgy, associating "source" with production and birthing.[29] In analyzing Friedman's feminist work in her article, "Jewish Spiritual Healing, 'Mi Shebeirach,' and the Legacy of Debbie Friedman," Tanya Sermer writes, "Friedman's creative efforts at inclusivity influenced the awareness of gender issues in Jewish life and empowered women in worship and music."[30]

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[27] Schiller, 2022.

[28] "B'ruchot Habaot," *Sing Unto God: The Debbie Friedman Anthology*, 46

[29] Tanya Sermer, "Jewish Spiritual Healing, *Mi Shebeirach*, and the Legacy of Debbie Friedman," *Soundscapes of Wellbeing in Popular Music* (2014): 82.

[30] Sermer, "Jewish Spiritual Healing," 82.

Contemporary Impact

Following Friedman's influence, Jewish liturgical composers have played with the use of non-masculine language in their own compositions. In Chava Mirel's setting of "Shema," she replaces the word "*Adonai*" with "*Havaya*," a feminine, Kabbalistic term for God that can be translated to "Being" or "Existence." Rabbi Josh Warshawksy and Coleen Dieker embraced feminine-conjugated Hebrew in their setting of "Hame'irah," a composition inspired by the text of the *Yotzier Or* prayer and the idea that God daily renews creation. Warshawsky describes how "in thinking about creation and rebirth, we were immediately drawn to the feminine. Hebrew is a gendered language, and most of the time in liturgy the masculine suffix is used for God. But here, praying for rebirth and renewal, we wanted to sing to The Divine in the feminine, and so we changed the suffixes to reflect that: *Hame'irah, Uv'tuvah, Mechadeshet*."[31] Friedman set the stage for composers to think beyond the masculine-langauge used throughout Jewish liturgy, and to utilize gender-inclusive language as the progressive Jewish world strives to embrace values of inclusivity in music and prayer.

As the language around gender-inclusivity continues to expand, composers such as Ze'evi Tovlev are thinking beyond the binary of feminine and masculine language and embracing the next level of inclusion with attention to nonbinary Hebrew. Tovlev has composed pieces using Hebrew inspired by the Nonbinary Hebrew Project, such as their setting of the Priestly Benediction, "Y'varech'cheh."[32] On November 30, 2022, Tovlev presented their senior cantorial recital in the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music at

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[31] Josh Warshawsky, "Hame'irah," 2018. https://joshwarshawsky.com/hameirah
[32] https://www.nonbinaryhebrew.com/

Hebrew Union College, on the topic of "Nonbinary Liturgy: Gender-Expansiveness in God and Ourselves."[33] The recital consisted of familiar contemporary and traditional melodies for Kabbalat Shabbat and Maariv, in which Tovlev reconjugated the Hebrew lyrics to make the text of the liturgy entirely nonbinary and inclusive to all. Just as Friedman saw a need to include feminine-language in prayer—something that has become much more mainstream in progressive Jewish spaces—Tovlev is bringing that same sense of awareness to nonbinary language through their musical compositions and leadership, paving the way for the next level of inclusivity within worship. In the words of Elana Arian, "The thing that's outside of what we do now—which almost always is going to be the thing that brings us forward—that's the story of everything."[34] Friedman's commitment to giving voice to those who felt left out, especially in a time when what she was doing was outside of the norm, continues to inspire composers today as they write from a place of greater awareness to inclusivity. Friedman set the stage for composers who followed her, modeling what is possible when we think beyond how things have always been done, and imagine what might be possible. In the words of Arian, "the guitar, the woman, the English, the folk music, the 'this isn't how we do things'….It just all represents stuff for people. People were really challenged, the status quo was challenged, and that's really where all the growth happens."[35]

Women in the Torah

In addition to empowering women through the use of gender-inclusive Hebrew, Friedman drew attention to women in the Torah, giving voice to biblical women who

[33] Ze'evi Tovlev Senior recital program, 2022.
[34] Arian, 2022.
[35] Arian, 2022.

were often left out of the Jewish narrative. Friedman composed settings inspired by biblical female leaders, such as "Miriam's Song" and "Devorah's Song." She highlighted the idea that Sarah was told to "go forth" in addition to Abraham through her setting of "L'chi Lach," including both the original command to Abraham—"*Lech L'cha"*—as well as the call to Sarah through the feminine-conjugated *"L'chi Lach."* Arian credits Friedman for bringing awareness to biblical women through her compositions, stating, "Just the fact that we have an awareness of Miriam at all, or Deborah or Shifra or Puah—it was all radical."[36] Captured in Ann Coppel's documentary, *A Journey of Spirit*, one woman remarked following a service led by Friedman, "she's transformed the way women experience Judaism. Women didn't have a chance to cast the liturgy and she's a model for all young women to think about the meaning of Judaism and create today's sacred texts."[37] Friedman's commitment to feminism and inclusivity shined through in her creative efforts to give women a voice in Jewish tradition. In the words of historian, author, and Friedman's lifelong friend, Deborah E. Lipstadt, "In her Jewish world, women were not silent appendages. They journeyed with Abraham. They danced to Miriam's song. They were 'Mothers in Israel' who, like the biblical Deborah, fought for justice."[38]

Contemporary Impact

"Miriam's Song" is one piece in particular that has served as inspiration for contemporary female composers to write about the female prophetess, whose significance

[36] Arian, 2022.
[37] Coppel, *A Journey of Spirit*, 2005.
[38] Deborah E. Lipstadt, "'And It Not Be Stilled': The Legacy of Debbie Friedman," *Between Jewish Tradition and Modernity: Rethinking an Old Opposition; Essays in Honor of David Ellenson*: 117.

in biblical history Friedman highlighted through her composition. One such composer is Rabbi Deborah Sacks Mintz, who in 2022 composed an original setting of "Miriam HaNeviah," with poetry written by Rabbi Leila Gal Berner in 1987. Mintz recorded the song alongside Elana Arian and Chava Mirel as a part of their trio group, New Moon Rising. Upon releasing the recording on the day of her rabbinic ordination, Mintz wrote, "Releasing a song about a powerful woman leader—recorded together with a team of beloved women spiritual-musical leaders—utilizing poetry by a trailblazing woman rabbi—is a humbling offering and deeply personal gift."[39]

Friedman empowered Jewish women through her musical compositions and her leadership. As a woman who grew up songleading at camps alongside male songleaders, Merri Lovinger Arian remarked in *A Journey of Spirit*, "Debbie has been a real model for me in terms of the type of leadership a woman can take in the Jewish community."[40] Prior to seeing Friedman songlead, Arian did not have examples of women songleading on their own without male partners. It was Friedman who gave her the confidence to see herself as someone who could step into her power as a strong female songleader in the Jewish community. Inspired by the paths she paved, Arian stated, "young girls growing up and listening to Debbie will never have that insecurity I had."[41]

In my interviews with Elana Arian, Shira Kline, and Julie Silver, all three musicians commented on the fact that Friedman paved the way for them as female singer-songwriters and prayer leaders. Julie Silver, who considers Friedman one of her greatest mentors, stated, "I loved her for what she wrote and how she allowed me to write

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[39] Deborah Sacks Mintz, "Miriam HaNeviah," Rising Song Records, Culver City, CA: February 2022.

[40] Coppel, *A Journey of Spirit*, 2005.

[41] Coppel, *A Journey of Spirit*, 2005.

my life."[42] Inspired by the way Friedman drew attention to the stories of women in the Torah, Silver composed a song titled, "Where Am I?," a piece in which she wrestles with finding herself in Judaism's sacred texts when women have been left out of the majority of ancient written history. At the same time, the message of her song inspires women to not simply be placed "neatly on the shelf," but to wrestle with Torah in order to find themselves within the text. The following is an excerpt from Silver's composition:

> I believe that it's my job to find myself
> Within a text that places me so neatly on the shelf.
> I struggle and I question, I criticize and doubt
> But surely this is what our tradition's all about.
> Where am I in the midst of this commandment?
> Where am I? I am not between the lines.
> Where am I? Is my promise not important?
> And how can I close my eyes?
> Where am I?[43]

While the desire to write from a feminist viewpoint was inspired by Friedman, Silver's compositions tend to come from an even more personal point of view. On writing in the first-person, Silver stated, "You never really heard Debbie use the word 'I'— if it's 'I,' she's quoting. I got what Debbie was doing, and I wanted to be more personal."[44] Learning from Friedman the importance of highlighting women's stories, Silver was inspired to take her teachings to the next level, challenging people to find themselves in the narrative of Torah, and to make a place for those who are left out.

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[42] Budd Mishkin, interview with Julie Silver, *92NY Talks: Celebrating the Life and Legacy of Debbie Friedman: An Evening of Conversation and Storytelling*, podcast audio, March 25, 2021. https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/92ny-talks/id905112228?i=1000514411796

[43] Julie Silver, "Where am I?," *Reunion,* produced by David Kates, Sounds Write Productions: 2009.

[44] Julie Silver, interview by Becky Mann, July 26, 2022.

Friedman firmly believed "we have to reframe things so that women are heard,"[45] and she did just that. Her feminist values are reflected throughout her music, touching the hearts of many and inspiring a continued commitment to inclusion. In the words of Rabbi Danny Freelander, "Debbie was the inheritor of Miriam's timbrel, but her timbrel was a guitar. Her voice led us out of a barren enslavement, and her spirit is eternal."[46]

Social Justice

As Friedman explained in the booklet of her 2006 album, *One People*, she wrote music in the folk genre as she believed folk music was all but inseparable from the philosophy of Reform Judaism and the social justice movements of the 1960s/70s. Living out Jewish values beyond the synagogue walls, Reform Judaism embraces acts of *tzedakah* and *tikkun olam* in the wider world. Sarah M. Ross notes, "Friedman's interest and perspective on Jewish feminism in general emerged from her belief in and activism related to social consciousness, and her songs reflect this."[47] Just as Friedman's commitment to feminism shined through her music and helped to embrace those who felt left out, so did her commitment to activism. Drawing inspiration from Jewish texts and liturgy, Friedman inspired others to help those in need through songs of social justice. Her 1998 record, *It's You*, is an album filled with songs that portray this message. "Save a Life," written in 1995 in memory of Israel's prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin, draws inspiration from a teaching found in both the Talmud and Qu'ran. Friedman's lyrics include, "Hurt another and the world's destroyed, but save a life and you will save the

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[45] Coppel, *A Journey of Spirit*, 2005.

[46] Jeff Klepper, "Shabbat Shirah with Debbie Friedman (& Me)," *Jeff Klepper's Blog*, January 31, 2012.

[47] Ross, "Who Sings Unto God?" 47.

world."[48] Aside from the overt message of how powerful it can be to help someone in need, Friedman's choice to write a setting of a message preached in both Judaism and Islam further symbolized her commitment to creating a world in which all people would care for one another. Her song concludes with the phrase, "Take my hand, we'll build the world together. Save a life and you will save the world."[49]

The idea of "building the world" is a theme that Friedman returns to throughout much of her social justice music. Judaism teaches that we are partners in creation with God, and therefore it is our duty to pursue acts of goodness and justice as we work towards *tikkun olam*, the perfection of our world. In her song, "Build This World Together," Friedman sings:

> We hear the sound of peace, but it's different this time
> We're gonna build this world together
> It's the eternal cry of humankind
> We're gonna build this world together
> We hear the sound of hope, the sound of peace
> It's a new day for a new generation
> A new time, no beginning, no end
> We're gonna build this world together.[50]

Recorded on her album *It's You* (1998), the piece is upbeat and joyful. In the words of Julie Silver, "It makes you want to pick up a shovel and do the work."[51] Silver remarked how the refrain of the song is a "quintessential Debbie kind of line," one that calls for working towards *tikkun olam* by working together to build the world we wish to see—a world that is inclusive, accepting, and filled with peace.

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[48] "Save a Life," *Sing Unto God: The Debbie Friedman Anthology*, 268.
[49] "Save a Life," 269.
[50] "Build This World Together" *Sing Unto God: The Debbie Friedman Anthology*, 76.
[51] Silver, 2022.

Contemporary Impact

Friedman's compositions have inspired contemporary composers to discover their own messages of social justice within Jewish texts and liturgy. Dan Nichols and Cantor Ellen Dreskin, both of whom knew Friedman as a teacher and friend, collaborated on a song inspired by the text of the *Aleinu* prayer, and that serves as a call to action. In diving into the meaning of each Hebrew word, Nichols and Dreskin interpreted the message of "*Aleinu l'shabei'ach*" to literally mean "It's up to us" to take our words of prayer and turn them into action. Their interpretation is reminiscent of the English reading found in the Reform siddur, *Mishkan T'filah*, "Pray as if everything depended on God. Act as if everything depended on you."[52] The final verse of Nichols and Dreskin's composition, complete with the hook that serves as a refrain throughout the piece, is as follows:

> It's up to us to own the vision, we are an answer to a call
> It's up to us to live the words we speak for the benefit of all
> It's up to us to bow down deeply, there's a broken world to raise
> *Aleinu l'shabei'ach*; it's time to live our praise[53]

Nichols credits Friedman for teaching him how to really dive into the text of a prayer and ask himself, "What does this really mean to me?" He remarked how Friedman taught him the importance of spending significant time with a Hebrew text in order to develop new ideas. She taught him to study each word, each *shoresh* (root of the word), and how it is used in other contexts in order to discover new, relevant meanings.[54] Nichols and Dreskin's study of the text of *Aleinu* led them to the place of discovering the

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[52] Mishkan T'filah: A Reform Siddur, Central Conference of American Rabbis, (2007): 469.

[53] Ellen Dreskin and Dan Nichols, "Aleinu L'shabei'ach," *The Complete Jewish Songbook for Children, Vol. III.,* Transcontinental Music Publications: 2021.

[54] Dan Nichols, interview by Becky Mann, August 16, 2022.

prayer as a call to action, inspiring their setting of "Aleinu l'shabei'ach" and giving new meaning to ancient words.

Contemporary Jewish composers have consistently turned to social justice music as a means to help people and to inspire change in times of inequality and social injustice. In 2017, a group of contemporary Jewish composers recorded an album titled *Together as One,* an album of social justice music, featuring original songs for a new generation meant to reflect the urgency of the current moment. The collaborative album gave contemporary, progressive composers an opportunity to come together and use their voices to inspire activism and help marginalized individuals, such as refugees and asylum seekers. Many of the composers on the album grew up listening to Friedman's music, including Julie Silver, Stacey Beyer, and Peri Smillow, all of whom were inspired by Friedman's belief that social justice is at the core of Reform Judaism. In the words of Silver, "Judaism teaches us to bring justice to the oppressed, to break the chains of slavery, to stand up for the one who cannot stand…this project gave me an opportunity to stand up when I needed a little boost myself."[55] Smillow was similarly inspired by the creation of the album, stating,"I am reminded that, while all it takes is one voice to move others to action, it is even more powerful when many voices join together in beautiful harmony, inspiring others to work to build the kind of world in which we all wish to live."[56] By modeling inclusion and activism through her music and leadership, Friedman left an ever-lasting impact on today's contemporary composers as they continue to look towards Jewish texts and liturgy to inspire social change.

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[55] "New Album of Social Justice Music to be Released at URJ Biennial 2017," *Religious Action Center*, November 22, 2017. https://rac.org/press-room/new-album-social-justice-music-be-released-urj-biennial-2017

[56]"New Album of Social Justice Music," 2017.

Chapter 3: Healing

Prior to Friedman, the idea of including a moment for healing in a progressive synagogue service was simply not a part of Reform worship. Friedman believed every person was in need of some form of healing, and that there could be great comfort found in creating spaces for people to pray for healing and wholeness together as a community. She first began to turn her attention to healing as a composer in the 1980s, a time in which her compositions became more intimate, reflective, and ballad-like. In Tanya Sermer's article, "Jewish Spiritual Healing, Mi Shebeirach, and the Legacy of Debbie Friedman," Sermer writes, "The 1980s brought particularly acute pain to her life. The AIDS epidemic took a devastating toll on a number of friends and their families, and she lost additional friends to cancer. Friedman flew around the country traveling from bedside to bedside, offering comfort through her settings of liturgy and psalms. Often with friends, Friedman composed new music and rituals so that those in her circle could muster the spiritual resources needed to cope."[57] One of the most impactful pieces Friedman composed during this time was her setting of "Mi Shebeirach," a prayer for healing that has touched people around the world. Her composition and its widespread reception served as a catalyst for making a moment of healing a standard part of Reform worship.

Mi Shebeirach

Friedman's "Mi Shebeirach" embodied so much of what made Friedman impactful as a composer: a singable melody, creative English, inclusion of the matriarchs

[57] Tanya Sermer, "Jewish Spiritual Healing, *Mi Shebeirach*, and the Legacy of Debbie Friedman," *Soundscapes of Wellbeing in Popular Music* (2014): 80.

in addition to the patriarchs, and a message that speaks right to the heart. The song is built upon the notion that every person can both offer and receive blessings of healing, and that spiritual wholeness can be found within Jewish tradition. In recounting the first time she sang "Mi Shebeirach" publicly at a healing service, Friedman recalled, "All of those who were in need of healing were invited to come forward to gather under a *tallit*. A mass exodus ensued and there was no one left sitting in the congregation. We climbed inside each word and in between each line looking to be enveloped and comforted; acknowledging our fragility and our brokenness. We knew that we were alone and yet not alone; that we were in a community and however isolated we might have felt before this experience, we were now a part of something much greater. There were tears, there was hope and a long silence when we finished singing the 'Mi Shebeirach.'"[58] Friedman's composition gave people a musical and liturgical vocabulary to help them face their challenges and pain on both a personal and communal level. As she stated in Coppel's *A Journey of Spirit*, "Anybody and everybody can offer blessings for their friends, for their family, and for the people whom they care about and love. You need no degree, you don't need to be a rabbi and you don't need to be a cantor, you only need to be a human being."[59] Her setting gave people a tangible way to both offer and receive prayers for healing and connected with many on a deeply personal level. Sermer believes, "the universality of her healing message was largely what made it so powerful—the acknowledgement that each person has pain and deserves support…each person can be an agent of healing."[60] Friedman traveled from bedsides to concert halls playing her "Mi

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[58] "Introduction to Mi Shebeirach by Debbie Friedman," *Sing Unto God: The Debbie Friedman Anthology*, 217.

[59] Coppel, *A Journey of Spirit*, 2005.

[60] Sermer, "Jewish Spiritual Healing," 80.

Shebeirach," creating prayerful moments of healing that have remained with people throughout their lives. When once asked what part of her work she finds the most meaningful, Friedman replied, "that people are able to use my music for their own healing and well-being, that they can find comfort in it…That's the ultimate gift."[61]

Cantor Jeff Klepper recalls many powerful moments leading alongside Friedman as she sang her "Mi Shebeirach." Whenever she played the piece for a congregation, community or individual in need of healing, Friedman insisted that people not sing the first verse and chorus along with her, but that they simply receive the prayer. If Klepper would try and play along, Friedman would look at him and whisper, "Klep, put the guitar down." Klepper recalls, "She wouldn't close her eyes but would look at each person in the room—she wanted you to know she cared about you."[62] Friedman's ability to make people feel seen and cared for was one of her greatest gifts, and one of the main reasons her "Mi Shebeirach" became so impactful. Sermer writes, "Without Friedman's personal connection and compassion, it is difficult to imagine that her piece would have reached the level of broad usage that it has."[63]

In addition to the personal, heartfelt manner in which Friedman sang her "Mi Shebeirach," the music and lyrics of the composition itself portray Friedman's midrash on this prayer for healing. The song consists of two verses, each beginning with Hebrew and leading into her creative English. Friedman begins the first verse of the piece with the traditional Hebrew text, "*Mi Shebeirach avoteinu" (*May the one who blessed our fathers)

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[61] Lisa Alcalay Klug, "Jewish Bard Featured in Documentary Film," Jewish Telegraphic Agency, 2005. https://www.jta.org/2005/04/06/lifestyle/jewish-bard-featured-in-documentary-film

[62] Jeff Klepper, "Visions of Debbie Friedman," *Musica Judaica* 20 (2013): 265. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26454589.

[63] Sermer, "Jewish Spiritual Healing," 85.

and continues with the feminist inclusion of "*mekor habracha l'imoteinu"* (Source of blessing for our mothers.) When she returns to the Hebrew in the second verse, she once again invokes the patriarchs and matriarchs, yet this time she swaps their place in the blessing, "*Mi Shebeirach imoteinu Mekor habracha l'avoteinu*." The gender-inclusive Hebrew in Friedman's piece further emphasizes her belief that all are capable of offering and receiving blessings of healing.

The melody of both verses is identical, leaping up on the word "*habracha*" as if musically reaching up towards the heavens. In Friedman's English text, the melody of the line, "bless those in need of healing" goes up to the ninth degree—the peak of the piece—adding emphasis and intensity to the central idea of the prayer. The song ends by asking God to grant all in need of healing both a "renewal of body" and "renewal of spirit," emphasizing the idea that many are in need of spiritual, mental, and emotional healing in addition to or in place of physical healing. In the words of Friedman, "While we know full well that healing of the body may not be a possibility, we know that healing of the soul has infinite possibilities."[64]

Friedman's composition gave people the words they needed to address their pain, recognizing that true healing is less about finding a cure, and more about finding spiritual wholeness. She understood that we all go through times in which we feel broken, and she wanted to find a way to help people feel whole. In the words of Friedman, "'Mi Shebeirach' can be uttered amidst havoc or in calmness, aloud or in silence…in moments of joy and relief or in times of anguish and despair. There is room to be angry and still utter these words, affirming life and maintaining a connection to our ancestors who felt

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[64] "Introduction to Mi Shebeirach by Debbie Friedman," *Sing Unto God: The Debbie Friedman Anthology*, 217.

anger."[65] Friedman's setting is meant to capture the complexity of our prayers for healing, embodying both our pain and hopefulness. The global success of her piece and the profound impact it has had on Jewish composers is largely due to Friedman's ability to not shy away from pain, but to acknowledge and confront it. In the words of Julie Silver, "She teaches us how to walk through with two—with the vulnerable and the strong. I am both. That was Debbie's gift to us. We are vulnerable and we are strong."[66]

Friedman's "Mi Shebeirach" inspired countless composers to write their own interpretations of this liturgy, as well as other texts that give people a way to express their need for personal, communal, and global healing. A 2002 compilation of healing repertoire included thirteen settings of Mi Shebeirach, two of which were traditional chazzanut, and ten of which were contemporary settings composed after Friedman's "Mi Shebeirach." Her setting revolutionized the way people thought about healing within worship. As Cantor Jonathan Comisar stated, "She had so much nuance in her idea of what healing was…There was no petition to magically be healed. She tapped into something deeper. Give us strength, and we're not alone. She didn't ask for healing. She asked for renewal."[67]

Healing Services

In addition to her setting of "Mi Shebeirach," Friedman composed a variety of healing repertoire, all of which spoke to her vision of balancing both our gifts and burdens. Much of her healing repertoire was composed for healing services developed by

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[65] "Introduction to Mi Shebeirach," *Sing Unto God: The Debbie Friedman Anthology*, 217.

[66] Julie Silver, interview by Becky Mann, July 26, 2022.

[67] Jonathan Comisar, interview by Becky Mann, September 13, 2022.

Friedman in the 1980s and popularized throughout the 80s and 90s. At a time when many of her friends were battling AIDS and cancer, Friedman felt that healing services could offer people a place to express their prayers together as a community. By connecting people to the idea that services can be about healing, she shifted the idea of what a prayer service could look like. Through communal music, poetry, and meditation, Friedman's healing services provided comfort and hope for so many amidst their pain. Like the central message of her "Mi Shebeirach," Friedman's healing services were built upon the idea that no one is immune to the need for healing, and that there is a sense of wholeness found in praying together as a community. In the words of Friedman, "We must be willing to confront the pain, the enemy, and befriend it; that it becomes not only our teacher, but a teacher to all of those who are in our circle of life, our community. Jewish life was not meant for us to experience alone; not the joy and not the sorrow."[68] The services attracted people from all walks of life, many of whom did not find meaning in traditional prayer services, but found great comfort in the spiritual togetherness of Friedman's healing services. People showed up to pray not only for themselves, but for those in their circle of family and friends. For all in attendance, the act of singing and praying together as a community helped people to see that they were not alone on their journey, and that comfort could be found in leaning on one another for support. Friedman stated, "Oftentimes, when we're ill or depressed, we feel spiritually wounded. We withdraw, we isolate, and we leave ourselves out in the cold. During healing services, we stand together; share time, song, and prayer, and acknowledge that we're grieving, we're in pain, and we're in solidarity. We're not seeking miracles, we're not casting away our

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[68] "Introduction to Mi Shebeirach," *Sing Unto God: The Debbie Friedman Anthology*, 217.

crutches—we're finding a way to deal with the fact that we might not be able to put them down."[69]

Friedman's healing services had a profound impact not only on those who attended the services, but also on the co-leaders and collaborators with whom she worked with. A young rabbi and composer in the 1990s, Rabbi Ken Chasen co-led monthly healing services with Friedman at Westchester Reform Temple in Scarsdale, New York. The two would meet regularly to plan the services with a mix of poetry, music, and meditations. They would make a detailed outline for each service, yet according to Chasen, Friedman would almost always abandon the outline once the service began. Chasen recalled, "It would drive me bonkers at first because I'm a new rabbi and want to prepare the thing and then do the thing we prepared…We'd be in the middle of page one and she's over here doing something completely unrelated to what we planned. I had no idea what was coming next."[70] While at first Chasen felt inner-resistance, he quickly realized that Friedman was observing the room, and wherever she took them in the moment was always better than what they had planned. Chasen recalled, "I learned to trust that impulse of hers, and it taught me to always be watching and feeling with those same sensibilities about the people that I lead."[71] As a newly ordained rabbi and up-and-coming composer, Chasen learned an extraordinary amount about the spontaneity of prayer from working alongside Friedman. He remarked, "She taught me that no matter

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[69] Hank Bordowitz, "Debbie Friedman: Singing Unto God," *Reform Judaism Magazine* Vol. 30, No. 4: 2002. https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/debbie-friedman-singing-unto-god/amp/

[70] Ken Chasen, interview by Becky Mann, July 6, 2022.

[71] Chasen, 2022.

how well prepared I am, a part of being prepared is being prepared to abandon the plan and be where you are."[72]

Recalling one particular moment of spontaneity, Chasen remembers Friedman showing up to the synagogue one day shortly before a healing service was to begin. She jumped out of her cab and ran to tell Chasen she just thought of a new melody on the car ride over and that he should grab his guitar to wrap chords around it. Together they figured out a chord progression to fit Friedman's new melody, worked out the form of the song, and decided that night to try it in the service if the moment felt right. Chasen recalls the moment they brought the song into the service feeling like magic; this new melody that didn't exist mere hours ago was now touching the hearts of so many in need of healing—and that is how Friedman's "Those Who Sow" was born. Friedman taught Chasen how to be present and attentive to the moment, both as a composer and prayer-leader. She taught him to truly feel into a room and to respond with sensitivity, openness, and vulnerability. Chasen strives to bring that same sense of empathy and presence to his work today as both a rabbi and composer.

Contemporary Impact

Inspired by Friedman, Chasen has composed songs that help people through times of tragedy and hardship with messages of strength and hope, offering a sense of both healing and comfort. One such composition, "Zeh Yadati," co-written with Rabbi Yoshi Zweiback, contains a singable, meditative chorus in which both Hebrew and English are meant to be sung together in harmony, implying its use in a communal setting. The

[72] Chasen, 2022.

Hebrew section includes, "*Zeh yadati, Zeh yadati, ki Elohim li*," while the English sings in a counter-melody, "This I know, this I know, You are with me."[73] The verses of the song invoke healing, with lines such as, "Where I enter broken, I will be made whole," and "Even when I wander into doubt and fear, healing breath awaits me and brings me back right here."[74] I witnessed the power of Chasen's composition firsthand as a participant at Hava Nashira, the national Jewish songleading conference, in May of 2022 in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin. Chasen was tasked with leading a Tuesday night ma'ariv service alongside Merri Lovinger Arian, when news broke of a horrific school shooting in Uvalde, Texas mere hours before the service. Chasen channeled what he learned from Friedman as he and Arian abandoned their original service plan in order to respond to the moment and meet the needs of the community. Chasen brought *"*Zeh Yadati" into the service that night, repeating it as a meditative chant and allowing space for people to find communal healing in a moment of deep despair. Like Friedman, he did not shy away from brokenness and anger in the present moment, but embraced it alongside the hope and healing found in communal prayer.

Similar to Chasen, contemporary composer Dan Nichols learned from Friedman the power of being attentive to all that people bring to a space, and responding to both the wholeness and brokenness present. Nichols recalls learning from Friedman at Hava Nashira while sitting next to her at song sessions and prayer services. During one particular song session after a meal, a young songleader's guitar string broke in the middle of a song. Noticing she was distressed, another young songleader quickly ran over and gave her his guitar, and the song session carried on. Nichols remembers Friedman

[73] Ken Chasen and Yoshi Zweiback, "Zeh Yadati," March 25, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1ju2HzENb4

[74] "Zeh Yadati," 2022.

putting her arm around him at that moment, pulling him close and saying, "Did you just see that? That's what this is all about! It's not about the chords and it's not about what we're singing…this whole thing is about how we learn to care for each other, pay attention to each other, love each other."[75] Friedman was attentive to the moments of connection and meaning and wanted to make sure Nichols noticed the power of those moments. Nichols remarked, "Since she told me that, I got a new appreciation and developed a new understanding of what this work can mean."[76]

Friedman's Personal Connection to Healing

While much of her healing repertoire was composed for friends who were sick, the impact of Friedman's music was all the more powerful as she too was in need of healing. In 1988, Friedman was diagnosed with dyskinesia, a neurological movement disorder that made her muscles tense up the more she moved them. She often had trouble moving her hands and fingers, and had difficulty walking as her illness would sporadically paralyze her legs. On stage, one would never know that Friedman suffered from dyskinesia, as her prayer leading was a fully embodied experience. She moved and danced with her guitar as she led her audiences in song. While she feared that her body might seize up on stage, her adrenaline and presence carried her through everytime she stepped in front of an audience or congregation. Friedman never let her illness define her. She stated, "My movement disorder is nothing more than a metaphor— each of us has our challenges."[77] Friedman's sister, Cheryl Friedman, believes that her practice of

[75] Nichols, 2022.
[76] Nichols, 2022.
[77] Coppel, *A Journey of Spirit*, 2005.

inviting people to just listen and receive the first verse of her "Mi Shebeirach" before inviting them to join on the second verse was as much about allowing herself to receive the prayer as it was about offering it to her audiences.[78] Out of Friedman's own challenges came great courage and great giving. Her personal prayers were reflected through her songs and her generous spirit, touching the hearts of those around her.

As someone who grappled with a chronic illness for much of her life, Friedman's perspective on healing was less about finding a cure, and more about seeking spiritual wholeness. She was particularly fascinated by the concept of the soul and spiritual healing, something she and others could turn to when physical healing didn't feel right. Friedman composed melodies for both "Asher Yatzar," a prayer thanking God for the proper functioning of our bodies, and "Elohai Neshama," a prayer thanking God for restoring our soul each day. While the two pieces can be sung on their own, Friedman often combined them into a medley or mashup, as both songs contain the same chord progression. In uniting these two prayers in one song, Friedman created a musical fusion of the body and soul. Her composition allowed people to focus on whatever part of the prayer resonated with them, whether that be the body, the soul, or both.

Peri Smillow, a contemporary composer and friend of Friedman's, learned from her the power of finding wholeness in herself and in her community when physical healing was not possible. Smillow particularly connects to Friedman's song, "The Time is Now," which speaks of gifts and burdens as being a part of all of our lives. In talking about her personal connection to Friedman's composition, Smillow stated, "One of the things Debbie and I shared is we both lived with chronic illness, which was a bond she shared with many people who experienced illness. This piece I think is genius, and I play

[78] Cheryl Friedman, personal interview, February 19, 2023.

it for myself a lot to remind me that the circle around me is sacred if I choose to see it as sacred."[79] Friedman's lyrics include:

> The time is now, we've gathered 'round,
> So bring all your gifts and bring all your burdens with you.
> No need to hide, arms open wide,
> We gather as one to make a *makom kadosh*.[80]

Friedman's lyrics invite us to bring our full selves to prayer—even and especially the parts of us that feel broken. She modeled showing up to prayer from a place of vulnerability, not shying away from the struggles of life, but acknowledging that brokenness is a part of the human experience—one she strived to help others navigate through her music.

Contemporary Impact

Smillow's musical setting of "Hineini" draws on the inspiration she gained from Friedman. The traditional *Hineini* prayer is recited by the cantor in the first-person on the High Holy Days. The prayer asks God for the ability to pray on behalf of the community, asking for one's prayers to be accepted by God despite one's personal shortcomings. Smillow connected with this idea of praying from a place of imperfection, as her setting of "Hineini" asks God to accept our prayers just as we are. Her lyrics include lines such as, "Oh God, this body is all that I have. May I be blessed to sing your song."[81] Inspired by Friedman, Smillow strives to express the idea that we are holy just as we are, and that we can experience wholeness even as we experience challenges.

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[79] *92NY Talks,* 2021.

[80] "The Time is Now," *Sing Unto God: The Debbie Friedman Anthology*, 315.

[81] Peri Smillow, "Hineini," 2005. https://www.perismilow.com/index.php?page=songs&category=Blessings&display=64

Similarly influenced by Friedman, Dan Nichols' 2016 album, *Beautiful and Broken*, is filled with songs that balance both the joy and hardship present in each of our lives. His music echoes Friedman's message that we are all capable of finding spiritual wholeness despite our brokenness. Songs on the album include Nichols' interpretation of "Asher Yatzar," in which he sings:

> "I thank you for my life, body and soul.
> Help me realize I am beautiful and whole.
> I'm perfect the way I am, and a little broken too.
> I will live each day as a gift I give to You."[82]

While the traditional text of *Asher Yatzar* thanks God for letting our bodies work properly each day, Nichols' interpretation aligns with Friedman's belief that brokenness exists inside all of us, yet it does not diminish our ability to live a full, beautiful life.

Along with Nichols, contemporary composer Josh Nelson saw Friedman's journey as an inspiring one. In reflecting on Friedman's impact, Nelson remarked, "She did not have an easy journey and through it all the thing we remember about her, when you talk to anyone who met her, it wasn't that she hid that pain, it wasn't that she pretended it wasn't there, but she overcame it with joy with every interaction. With every chance she had to have even the slightest effect on someone's life, she took it."[83]

Mourning into Dancing

Through her music and her deep sensitivity, Friedman helped people see that no matter what challenges life presents, joy can still be found in each of our souls. Her composition, "Mourning into Dancing," emphasizes this exact sentiment:

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[82] Dan Nichols, "Asher Yatzar," *Beautiful and Broken*, 2015. https://www.dannicholsmusic.com/

[83] *92NY Talks,* 2021.

"You turn my mourning into dancing
So that my soul might sing to You.
So that my soul sing to You
And it not be still."[84]

The chorus of the song simply repeats the words, "Oh God, my God, forever I will thank you. *Odecha.*" Differing in sound from much of her healing repertoire, "Mourning into Dancing" takes on a joyful, upbeat melody that reminds us that the hope within our souls and our gratitude for life cannot be diminished. Similar to the message of her song "Those Who Sow," Friedman's "Mourning into Dancing" teaches us that "with our great joy comes our great pain, and all of our mourning will one day turn to dancing."[85]

By acknowledging the balance of gifts and burdens in each of our lives, Friedman revolutionized the way people thought about healing, centralizing the idea for healing within prayer. Her emphasis on healing changed the nature of prayer in Reform spaces and beyond, as she connected people to the idea that praying and singing together can help us feel more whole. She helped countless people find their way back to wholeness, recognizing that we are all in need of healing, and that no one is alone on their journey. In the words of Friedman, "A person cannot free himself from bondage. The truth is we are all prisoners, and we all need to help each other out of prison. Healing is in recognizing that each of us is limited. None of us is perfect. Jacob wrestled with the angel and walked away. We are all limping. But we all have the potential to heal and to use our shattered hearts to bring comfort to others and to the brokenness of the world."[86] Just as Friedman

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[84] "Mourning into Dancing," *Sing Unto God: The Debbie Friedman Anthology*, 229.

[85] *92NY Talks,* 2021.

[86] Personal quote collected by Merri Lovinger Arian

brought comfort to those around her, her influence continues to inspire composers as they carry on her legacy, bringing wholenes to the world through new songs of hope and healing.

Chapter 4: Music as Midrash

Music as midrash is the idea that every melody for every essential piece of text that exists is in essence a midrash on the text by the composer of that melody. Friedman taught that text should always guide the music, and that a composer should never write a song simply for the sake of writing a new melody, but because they have something that must be said about the text. Just as rabbis have interpreted and reinterpreted texts for thousands of years, so can composers offer new interpretations of ancient words through music.

As a composer without any formal, institutional training, cantors and scholars often deemed Friedman's music as not "real" Jewish music. However, music as midrash was how Friedman justified her music as a legitimate form of Jewish music. Her musical interpretations offered new insight and relevance to the liturgy, just as rabbinic midrashim offer new interpretations of ancient texts. I first learned about the concept of music as midrash from my teacher, Elana Arian, who learned about it from her teacher, Debbie Friedman. Arian explained, "Debbie would answer this question of 'Why are you composing a new melody for something we already have?' with her idea of music as midrash… it was a foundational idea of her work and gave rise to an entire generation that reinterpreted text that was quite old and made them feel new."[87] Making the old feel new was an essential part of Friedman's work as she made ancient texts feel relevant to the modern day. As Friedman remarked in *A Journey of Spirit*, "I love the richness of the

[87] Bob Bahr, "Music as Midrash Shapes Reform Worship," *Atlanta Jewish Times,* February 26, 2020. https://www.atlantajewishtimes.com/music-as-midrash-shapes-reform-worship/

tradition of the text and the poetry of the text, and I like to play with the text. I think it lends itself to new interpretations and new ways of being incorporated into our lives."[88]

Contemporary Impact

In order to interpret a text and find personal meaning within it, Friedman believed that a composer must first have a clear understanding of the traditional text. For Dan Nichols, this was one of the most influential lessons he learned from Friedman, and one that he carries with him every time he writes a new setting of a traditional text. Friedman taught Nichols the importance of digging into the Hebrew and understanding the meaning of each individual word. She encouraged him to look at the *shoresh* [root] of the words and how they are used in other contexts, as really knowing the Hebrew helps to develop new ideas. Friedman taught Nichols to thoroughly study any given text, and then ask himself, "What does this really mean to me?"[89]

Nichols' English interpretation of the *Chatzi Kaddish*, titled "Beyond," came from this approach. In taking the time to study a prayer he normally chants quickly in Aramaic, he was struck by the line, "*l'eila min kol birchata v'shirata*, *tushb'chata v'nechemata*" in which God is said to be "beyond all earthly words and songs of blessing, praise and comfort."[90] Nichols interpreted this prayer as a celebration of the beauty and goodness God brings to the world as we ask for that goodness to prevail in our lives. His lyrics include:

> May Your wonder be celebrated, May Your name be consecrated
> May Your brilliance never fade from the magnificent world You made.

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[88] Coppel, *A Journey of Spirit*, 2005.
[89] Nichols, 2022.
[90] Mishkan T'filah, 224.

May Your ways prevail in our own days, in our own lives,
And in the life of all Israel.
May Your name receive the same beauty that You bring,
Though You are far beyond the sweetest song that we could ever sing.[91]

The traditional *Chatzi Kaddish* is typically recited by the prayer leader with the congregation responding in several moments throughout the prayer. Nichols chose to emphasize the congregational response by making the chorus of his composition a singable, communal refrain, in which the congregation sings between verses, "And let us, and let us say, Amen." By giving the congregation this refrain, the song emphasizes the importance of the communal response and a sense of togetherness. Nichols' song invites people to take time to meditate on the meaning of the *Chatzi Kaddish*, a prayer that is often not given much thought as congregations tend to move quickly through it in services. In the words of Arian, "Debbie taught that to get connected to the words of the liturgy is to make them live in our own mouth and in our own body."[92] Nichols' musical midrash on the *Chatzi Kaddish* reminds us that while God may be beyond our earthly realm of praise, the pure act of singing and praying together strengthens our connection to prayer, to God and to one another, as we become all the more aware of the beauty that surrounds us.

Friedman's attention to music as midrash became more prominent throughout her career as she deepened her knowledge of texts and liturgy. In her article, "And It Not Be Stilled': The Legacy of Debbie Friedman," Deborah E. Lipstadt writes, "Friedman's music grew more textured and more deeply in conversation with the tradition…This metamorphosis was enhanced by the learning partners she sought from all across the

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[91] Dan Nichols, "Beyond," *My Heart is in the East*, 2004.
[92] Bahr, "Music as Midrash"

spectrum."[93] Friedman studied nusach with Cantor Jack Mendelson, she co-wrote pieces with Drora Setel and Tamara Cohen, both of whom were pursuing higher degrees in Jewish studies, and she had an orthodox chavruta, Joe Septimus, with whom she studied Talmud on a weekly basis for close to a decade.[94] While teaching on the cantorial faculty at HUC, she chose to sit in on as many classes as she could, including classes on traditional chazzanut. In the 1980s, Friedman co-led seminars on liturgy alongside Rabbi Stuart Kelman and Dr. Gail Dorph, where she learned about Abraham Joshua Heschel's notions of empathy and expression. Friedman was particularly inspired by Heschel's notion that "prayer can best be understood as a response by the liturgist to the deepest of human needs, challenges, and wonderments—the same needs, challenges, and wonderments we face today."[95] Just as rabbis have done for centuries, Friedman's interpretations of ancient texts strived to fit the needs, challenges, and wonderments of the modern day as she expressed her midrashim through music.

L'chi Lach

One of Friedman's most well-known compositions, "L'chi Lach," is a musical midrash on *Parshat Lech L'cha*. In studying the parsha, Friedman interpreted Genesis 12:1-2 as God speaking to Sarah in addition to Abraham, telling them both to leave their home and "go forth" to the land that God will show them. While the Torah includes the masculine "*lech l'cha*," indicating that God spoke to Abraham, Friedman chose to include the feminine "*l'chi lach*" in her composition, highlighting her belief that God spoke to Sarah as well. By including both the masculine and feminine forms of God's call

[93] Lipstadt, "'And It Not Be Stilled,'" 116-117.
[94] Lipstadt, "'And It Not Be Stilled,'" 116-117.
[95] Lipstadt, "'And It Not Be Stilled,'" 116-117.

to go forth, Friedman's midrash speaks to the larger idea that the call to go forth is not just a call upon Abraham and Sarah, but a call to all people. In a spoken introduction to "L'chi Lach" at Beth Emet Synagogue in Evanston, IL., Friedman taught, "Each and everyone of us sitting here, at some point or another, has to go forth like Abraham and like Sarah on this journey and become all that we can be…The more you come to realize all that you are and the power you hold to really have an impact on the world…the more you'll see the world start to change."[96] The lyrics in Friedman's "L'chi Lach" are written in the first person and can be interpreted as God speaking to Abraham and/or Sarah. At the same time, the lyrics are intended for the modern-day listener, resonating with people everywhere as they go forth on their personal and unique journeys through life. Friedman's lyrics include:

> *L'chi lach*, to a land that I will show you.
> *Lech l'cha*, to a place you do not know.
> *L'chi lach*, on your journey I will bless you
> And you shall be a blessing, *L'chi lach*.[97]

By adapting and expanding upon the text, Friedman's music became a kind of midrash that gave people room to apply it to their lives. The melody on the words "l'chi lach" and "lech l'cha" ascends at the start of each phrase, indicating the journey forth. Friedman often spoke about how the phrase "l'chi lach," most often translated to "go forth," can also be translated to "go unto yourself." The "l'chi lach" in the final phrase, "And you shall be a blessing, l'chi lach," reflects this interpretation. Unlike the ascending

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[96] Klepper, Jeff. "15 Debbie (tape cuts out)," *The Jewish Music Basement Tapes*, recording from Shabbat Shirah at Beth Emet Synagogue in Evanston, IL., January 29, 1988. https://soundcloud.com/jeff1326/15-debbie-tape-cuts-out?utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing

[97] "L'chi Lach," *Sing Unto God: The Debbie Friedman Anthology*, 174.

"l'chi lach" and "lech l'cha" in the first three phrases, the final "l'chi lach" does not ascend, but instead returns to the tonic, emphasizing the idea that the journey forth is also a journey of returning home to one's truest self. Inspired by Friedman's ability to inspire and teach through her musical midrashim, Cantor Ellen Dreskin remarked, "Her modern interpretations of Hebrew texts, some in Hebrew and some in English, raised our own level of connection to the liturgy much higher than it had ever been before with her takes on the liturgy itself."[98] Friedman's setting of "L'chi Lach" has been used throughout hundreds of communities, filling people with blessing, courage and strength to go forth, and to go unto themselves.

Shema Koleinu

The melodic and harmonic structures of Friedman's compositions contributed to the expression of her musical interpretations. One example of this can be seen through a musical analysis of Friedman's setting, "Shema Koleinu." While most settings of this liturgy are written in minor, Friedman chose to compose a setting in a primarily major mode, expressing the belief that God hears our prayers and answers us with mercy and compassion. Her song can be divided into the three sections displayed in the following table:

[98] Ellen Dreskin, interview by Lori Brock, "The Life and Music of Debbie Friedman z'l," Temple Beth El of Boca Raton, January 17, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2LcKCCNo950&t=2675s

Section	Hebrew	English
A	*Shema koleinu, Adonai Eloheinu, chus v'rachem aleinu*	Hear our voice, Adonai our God, have compassion on us
B	*v'kabel b'rachamim uv'ratzon et t'filateinu, ki El shomea t'filot ve'tachanunim Atah.*	And accept our prayer with favor and mercy, for You are a God who hears prayer and supplication.
C	Yai lai lai…	Yai lai lai…

The A section of the piece contains two octave leaps, the first beginning on the dominant on the word "*Shema*" and walking down to the tonic, and the second beginning on the tonic on the word "*Adonai*" and walking down to the dominant. According to Jewish music scholars, Avi Bar-Eitan and Tanya Sermer, this suggests that "the believer calls to the Creator and the Creator in turn answers the prayer and sends down abundance and blessing." The octave leap upward indicates the worshiper crying to God "above," while the downward motion indicates God answering those "below."[99] The B section begins in the relative minor on the words "*v'kabel b'rachamim uv'ratzon et t'filateinu*," and returns to the hopeful major mode at the end of the phrase. The B section, however, does not end on the tonic, but instead leaps up to the dominant on the word "*Atah*," before returning to the A section. This leap to the dominant followed by the return to the A section emphasizes "the open circulatory inherent in the relationship between the believer and God: the believer prays to God and God returns to answer the believer's prayers, and then the cycle begins again."[100] After repeating the A and B sections twice,

[99] Avi Bar-Eitan and Tanya Sermer, "Debbie Friedman's Shema' Koleinu: An ancient prayer in a new musical garment," *Jewish Music Research Center*, December 2016. https://jewish-music.huji.ac.il/content/debbie-friedman%E2%80%99s-shema%E2%80%99-koleinu-ancient-prayer-new-musical-garment

[100] Bar-Eitan and Sermer, "Debbie Friedman's Shema' Koleinu"

the song concludes with a new melody in the C section, a nigun sung on the words "yai lai lai" and centered around the singable fifth scale degree. While the entirety of the piece is written in an accessible style, the concluding nigun is a specific moment that emphasizes the communal voice. The nigun expresses Friedman's midrash that we are not just asking God to hear our individual voices, but our collective voice as we call out in prayer. Friedman's "Shema Koleinu" manages to capture both the deep crying out and calling upward to God, and the joyfulness found in God answering our prayers.

Contemporary Impact

Friedman's teaching of music as midrash inspired countless Jewish liturgical composers. Jeff Klepper, who recalls Friedman teaching about music as midrash at Hava Nashira, stated, "She would challenge you to find something new, and she always said, 'Be the prayer.'"[101] Friedman knew that songwriting was an extremely personal, vulnerable act, and yet she also knew the most personal songs were the ones that resonated most strongly with people. Friedman taught that in order for a text to be incorporated into our lives, the composer must find personal meaning within it.

Julie Silver credits Friedman for teaching her this lesson and for inspiring her to write from a place of authenticity and vulnerability. Silver composed two settings of "Pitchu Li," a text that comes from Psalm 118:19, included in the traditional Hallel liturgy. The English translation of the verse reads, "Open the gates of righteousness for me, that I may enter them and praise God."[102] The first setting of this text Silver wrote was for her 1997 album, *Walk With Me*, and alternates between the Hebrew verse and a

[101] Klepper, 2022.
[102] Psalm 118:19, *Sefaria.* https://www.sefaria.org/Psalms.118.19?lang=bi

nigun. The song is written in a minor mode and takes on an upbeat, rock feel in both the rhythm of the guitar and the vocal melody. Silver jokingly calls this setting "the punk version," as it echoed much of what Silver was feeling at this point in her life. When Silver composed this piece in the 1990s, she was struggling to come to terms with her sexuality. She longed to live openly as an lesbian woman, but did not yet feel ready to come out. The words of *Pitchu Li* hit her right in the heart as she longed to bust through the gates and live as her true self. Silver stated, "At the time that I wrote this, I thought, 'I'm closeted and I want out, and I want in.' I was struggling and I was raging…I couldn't even write an English lyric to it because I was so bound up, you know, what was I gonna say? I wasn't there yet, but I loved this verse."[103] At this stage of her life, the words of the psalm felt to Silver like banging on a door she longed to break through, and she expressed this interpretation through her music.

Nearly twenty years after Silver wrote her first "Pitchu Li," she returned to the same psalm when she was commissioned in 2015 to write a new setting of this verse for the installation of Cantor Lizze Weiss at Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills. Now happily out of the closet and a proud member of the LGBTQ community, Silver read the words "*pitchu li shaaray tzedek*" ("open for me the gates of righteousness") in an entirely new light. The message of opening the gates now took on a new meaning for Silver as she thought about the peace, tranquility and freedom that comes from living openly as her true self. She thought about those who helped her open the metaphorical gates of her own life, and felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude. Most specifically, she thought about her dear friend and mentor, Debbie Friedman, to whom Silver first came out. Silver's 2015

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[103] "Queerdallah with Shira Kline and Julie Silver," *Kol HaChaverim,* recorded on June 20, 2020. https://www.facebook.com/kolhachaverim/videos/713136366115501/

setting of "Pitchu Li" takes on a gentleness that mirrors the love and care Friedman showed Silver as she helped her along on her personal journey. While she wrote it several years after Friedman died, Silver says she can hear Friedman in the music, stating, "Debbie is a part of this song...her friendship and her mentoring and guiding me…I think that my music naturally became an extension of that, the way that her music was an extension of her. Her dreams were for everyone."[104] While she had previously felt unable to write an English lyric to her 1997 "Pitchu Li," Silver's 2015 setting contains two English verses, both of which express her midrash on the text. Her English lyrics are as follows:

> Sometimes I lose my way, I stumble and fall
> I fail to see the open door and only see the wall
> Sometimes I close my ears, when open they should be
> But then I stop and listen to that still small voice inside of me.
>
> May I see my life in the work of Your hands
> And walk in love and freedom to the promised land
> And when I lose myself, I pray that I may see
> The spark inside the darkness and the gates open for me.[105]

Approaching the text of "Pitchu Li" a second time around, this time from a different perspective, Silver's musical midrash captures a feeling of both gratitude and gentleness through her expressive lyrics and music. The chorus of the song includes the Hebrew text of Psalm 118:19, with each measure followed by an echo intended for the congregation and/or a duet partner. While her song was inspired by a deeply personal journey, Silver's midrash resonates with people everywhere, as the journey to stepping into one's truest potential and most authentic self is a struggle experienced by all of

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[104] Silver, 2022.

[105] Julie Silver, "Pitchu Li," 2015. http://juliesilver.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Pitchu-Li-Silver-in-D.pdf

humanity in individual ways. Silver's song strives to capture what it means "To be able to help someone else through….That door is open for me, someone opened it for me, and I will open it for you."[106]

The two contrasting settings of "Pitchu Li" are prime examples of how different musical settings of the same text can serve as a form of midrash. Both settings came from a place of authenticity and expressed how the composer viewed the text in a certain moment in time, yet the two pieces offer vastly different interpretations of the same verse due to the time each piece was composed. The idea of letting one's self speak through their music, and in turn express one's personal interpretation of a text, is a lesson Friedman taught Silver and one that she carries with her as a composer and spiritual leader.

You are the One

Like Silver, Cantor Benjie Ellen Schiller was moved by the authenticity in Friedman's songwriting. She recognized that Friedman never wrote for the sole sake of useability, but because she was moved by the text in a way that inspired musical expression. Friedman taught Schiller that "purity of intention and emotion is what makes a great piece."[107] Both Silver and Schiller were inspired by Friedman's setting of "You are the One," which embodied Friedman's midrash on an ancient prayer by Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, often referred to as Reb Nachman's Prayer. The prayer asks that we may have the ability to go outside and be among nature as we pray, surrounded by the beauty of God's creation as we stand alone and offer the words of our heart to God. Silver hears

[106] Silver, 2022.
[107] Schiller, 2022.

Friedman's interpretation of Reb Nachman's prayer through the music of "You Are The One," stating, "The chord progression—the musical midrash—has this verticalness about it, reaching upward towards God."[108] The verticalness felt in the music can be found in both the chord progression and melody of the piece. There are several octave leaps in the vocal melody, beginning with the first two phrases, "You are the One / for this I pray." The leaps from a low to high G in each of these phrases embody the act of a person standing below and praying upward towards God. There are several moments where the melodic motion of a phrase ascends when talking to or about God, and descends when talking about one's self, such as in the phrase, "and give you all that's in my heart." The melody on "and give you" starts on the tonic C and ascends upward towards the dominant G, followed by descending motion from the dominant back to the tonic on "all that's in my heart." The melodic motion throughout the piece imitates a conversation between the worshiper and God, capturing the feeling of standing alone and speaking to God from one's heart. While written in the key of C, Friedman harmonizes the piece with moments of flatted sixths, sevenths, and minor fifths, invoking a mystical feeling in the harmonic progression. The ending tag of the piece takes on a particularly interesting chord progression, as the chords move from Ab-Bb-Gm7-C on the final phrase of the piece, "And I'll sing my soul to You." The Ab, Bb, and Gm7 chords are not part of the typical C major scale, and they add a sense of mystery and awe to the piece as the melody climbs upward before concluding on the tonic C major. The entire piece takes on a gentle, quiet feel that expresses Friedman's midrash on Reb Nachman's Prayer, embodying that personal moment of connection between the worshiper and God.

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[108] Silver, 2022.

Contemporary Impact

As a composer, Schiller was inspired by Friedman's expressive interpretations of text through her music, stating, "The words are expressed and they come to life. The music doesn't betray the words."[109] Similarly to Friedman, Schiller was inspired by the teachings of Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, and offered her own midrash on a teaching of Reb Nachman's through her music. Psalm 146:2 reads, "*a'hal'lah Adonai b'chaya azamrah l'Elohai b'odi,"* which can be translated to "I will praise God all my life, sing hymns to God while I exist."[110] In *Likutei Moharan* I:282, Reb Nachman invites us to focus on the *od* in the word *b'odi*, and to see within it "that extra aspect of ourselves that helps us remember to feel worthy enough to offer praise."[111] In the words of Schiller, "I was feeling so enamored by this teaching of Nachman of Bratzlav—*Azamra*—this teaching that I will sing with all I have…I was so moved by it."[112] She interpreted this text as a communal song of praise, expressed with the fullness of one's spirit—a midrash she captures beautifully through her composition, "Azamra." Schiller's piece is written in an upbeat, joyous style, highlighting the phrase "*azamra l'Elohai b'odi, a'hal'lah*" as the chorus of the piece. Like many of Friedman's compositions, Schiller chose to include interpretive English in her piece to further expand upon her midrash. Co-written with another contemporary composer who was greatly influenced by Friedman, Craig Taubman, the English is as follows:

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[109] Benjie Ellen Schiller, interview by Becky Mann, June 30, 2022.

[110] Psalm 146:2, *Sefaria*. https://www.sefaria.org/Psalms.146.2?ven=Tanakh:_The_Holy_Scriptures,_published_by_JPS&vhe=Tanach_with_Nikkud&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en

[111] Benjie Ellen Schiller, *Azamrah: Songs of Benjie Ellen Schiller,* ed. Joel N. Eglash, Transcontinental Music Publications, 2018: viii.

[112] Benjie Ellen Schiller, interview by Becky Mann, June 30, 2022.

All sing to You, all praise to You
O Source of all creation
We call Your name, we sing Your praise
O Holy one of blessing
Hal'luyah.[113]

The piece builds throughout the English in the B section, leading into a C section which consists of a singable, communal refrain on the word "*Hal'luyah*," the purest expression of praise. Schiller's joyous interpretation of Psalm 146 and the idea of singing with all of one's soul is expressed through her musical midrash. The sweeping 6/8 rhythmic feel combined with the soaring melodic lines reflect a joyfulness throughout the entirety of the piece. Schiller thinks of this piece as a song that can be sung "to express a moment of joy at any time or place."[114] Like Friedman, Schiller's work elevates our understanding of texts and inspires new insight to ancient words through her compositions.

Friedman's teaching of music as midrash opened the door for Jewish composers to share their own insights and contemporary understandings of texts and liturgy through their music. She taught that we must not shy away from expressing our vulnerability and sharing our personal connections to the text, but that the most personal songs are often the ones that resonate most strongly with others and help people deepen their own connections to the liturgy. Composer Shira Kline recalls this being one of the biggest lessons she learned from Friedman. Kline was inspired by Friedman's "vulnerability in everything she taught," a lesson she and so many others who came under Friedman's influence bring to their own music.[115] In the words of Elana Arian, Friedman taught

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[113] Benjie Ellen Schiller, "Azamrah," *Azamrah: Songs of Benjie Ellen Schiller,* ed. Joel N. Eglash, Transcontinental Music Publications, 2018: 5-6.

[114] *Azamrah: Songs of Benjie Ellen Schiller,* 2018*:* viii.

[115] Shira Kline, interview by Becky Mann, August 10, 2022.

through her music interpretations that "it's not just about the realm of God and what God does, but about what we do."[116] Friedman brought text to people in a way that made it feel relevant to the modern day. Her impact continues to inspire composers as they add their voice to the Jewish narrative and offer new interpretations of ancient words through music as midrash.

[116] Bahr, "Music as Midrash"

Chapter 5: Innovation Interwoven with Tradition

Ethnomusicologist Judah Cohen argues that "each new mode of sound—be it Salomon Sulzer or the Eastern European cantorate in the United States among others—requires decades of popular endorsement to overcome establishment accusations of inauthenticity, emotional pandering, and/or musical illiteracy."[117] For much of her career, Debbie Friedman faced criticism from cantors and liturgical composers who believed her music did not belong in the synagogue. In her article "And It Not Be Still: The Legacy of Debbie Friedman," Deborah Lipstadt writes, "the aesthetics of Friedman's music were diametrically opposed to what cantors had been trained to sing," as her music strayed from the conventional sounds of the synagogue.[118] While the music of Reform congregations heavily consisted of Classical Reform repertoire, including Jewish art songs by composers such as Abraham Binder and Louis Lewandowski, Friedman's music was composed in a folk style, often accompanied by acoustic guitar and written in a simpler, singable vocal style. Additionally, many Conservative and Reform cantors relied on the use of *nusach* in their services, and could not accept the fact that Friedman was writing liturgical music in a style that strayed from the traditional Jewish modes. Many cantors feared Friedman was trying to replace traditional and Classical Reform music with folk melodies and camp songs, all of which they believed had a place in American Jewish summer camps, but not in the synagogues. As Friedman's popularity grew around the 1970s and 80s with an increasing number of young Reform Jews bringing her songs

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[117] Judah Cohen, "Debbie Friedman: A Life Transcribed." *Musica Judaica* 20 (2013): 260. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26454588

[118] Deborah E. Lipstadt, "'And It Not Be Stilled': The Legacy of Debbie Friedman," *Between Jewish Tradition and Modernity: Rethinking an Old Opposition; Essays in Honor of David Ellenson*: 115.

from camp back to their synagogues, cantors began to feel threatened. Cantor Richard Botton, who served as the cantor of Central Synagogue in New York City from 1974-1998, stated, "Debbie was to most cantors 'Haman.' She threatened us and we thought the great music of the synagogue was going to go."[119] The question of what makes Jewish music "Jewish" has been a debate among cantors and scholars for decades, yet for those who opposed Friedman, cantorial music sung in the traditional Jewish modes was crucial to the sound of the synagogue. Cantor Jack Mendelson argued, "if you don't preserve tradition when people come into the synagogue, people won't know what day, time, or season it is without the *nusach*."[120]

Much of the resistance Friedman faced came from a concern that her approach to Jewish music would result in a simplification of synagogue music. If Friedman's music became the norm in Shabbat services, would there still be a place for the great synagogue music of Binder, Lewandowski, Sulzer and Freed? Would congregants lose sight of the rich tradition of *nusach* and its relation to Jewish time if liturgy was only set to folk melodies? While all of these fears were indeed valid, Friedman's goal was never to get rid of one style of music, but to innovate worship in a way that would allow singable, contemporary melodies to exist alongside traditional music, creating more on-ramps into the liturgy for the wide variety of worshipers who come to pray. In the words of Friedman, "You just need to get people in the door singing and praying….if you don't have people coming to synagogue in the first place because they're totally disconnected from the *nusach* and they're totally alienated, none of it matters."[121] She believed that prayer should be accessible, inclusive and engaging for all, and in order for that to

[119] Coppel, *A Journey of Spirit*, 2005.
[120] Coppel, *A Journey of Spirit*, 2005.
[121] Coppel, *A Journey of Spirit*, 2005.

happen, multiple styles of music must coexist together. In the words of Cantor Rosalie Will, "Debbie started writing to express a text—to fill a void that meant something and reached people—never with the intention of replacing anything, but to get everyone to sing together."[122]

Openness to Learning

Just as Friedman believed in the power of communal singing to enhance worship, she also valued learning from those who connected to more traditional modes of prayer, such as *nusach*. While she may have seemed threatening from a distance, cantors who got to know Friedman quickly saw that her mission was not to abandon *nusach* and the traditional music of the synagogue, but to seek ways for the old to exist alongside the new. Judah Cohen writes that Friedman's work "reveals a restless mind endlessly curious about new ways to engage people in song, yet also shaped by the groups and institutions that brought her into their circles."[123] One such institution was Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York City, where Friedman joined the faculty of the School of Sacred Music in 2007. Hiring Friedman was considered a controversial move by much of the cantorial faculty due to her lack of formal training, yet her presence was the first of many stepping stones in the college recognizing the value of Friedman's style of music and the necessity of teaching cantorial students to perform it well. In the few years that she taught in the School of Sacred Music, Friedman not only imparted her wisdom to students, but strived to deepen her own knowledge of traditional modes and liturgy at every opportunity she had by learning from her fellow faculty

[122] Rosalie Will, interview by Becky Mann, July 26, 2022.
[123] Cohen, "A Life Transcribed," 259.

members. Her openness to learning allowed her to develop relationships of mutual respect and admiration with those around her. Cantor Jonathan Comisar, who served on the SSM faculty with Friedman, observed her always asking questions and "looking for ways to merge her music with chazzanut…she wanted to build those bridges."[124] Cohen writes, "Friedman became a student of *nusach*, while cantors creatively incorporated Friedman's music into their own liturgical worldviews."[125]

Innovation Within Tradition

One of the key figures inspired by Friedman's belief in innovation interwoven with tradition was Cantor Jack Mendelson. Prior to serving on the faculty together in the School of Sacred Music, Mendelson first met Friedman while chairing the Cantors Assembly convention in 1999. Mendelson believed it would benefit his Conservative colleagues to meet the person whose music was rapidly rising in popularity among progressive Jews, and who modeled an emerging style of communal singing within worship. Friedman initially declined the invitation, aware that she was considered a controversial figure among traditional Jews. Compared to the Reform movement in which Friedman had settled in a bit and found a greater degree of acceptance—particularly within the Union of Reform Judaism summer camps and in places interested in modernizing their worship style—the Conservative movement of the 1990s was much more invested in *nusach* and Hebrew, and was not interested in adjusting their liturgy. However, Friedman agreed to come to the convention, and as

[124] Jonathan Comisar, interview by Becky Mann, September 13, 2022.
[125] Cohen, "A Life Transcribed," 260.

Mendelson recalls, “the workshop was mobbed, and the air electric with anticipation and tension.”[126]

A newspaper article published in the Connecticut Jewish Ledger prior to the convention stated, “For Friedman, this is a vindication of sorts…her songs have become permanent parts of the liturgy in hundreds of synagogues, yet cantors tend to treat her music like a campfire singalong.”[127] Rabbi Danny Freelander, who served as the program director of the Reform movement’s Union of American Hebrew Congregations, stated that many cantors, particularly older and more traditional ones, “have a visceral negative reaction to her music because of what it represents to them…She represents the victory of American musical idioms over traditional Jewish music idioms.”[128] While Friedman’s goal was not to have one style of music “win” over another, she wanted to get people singing so that they felt connected. The popularity of her music among the average congregant spoke volumes. Schiller stated, “She understands how the non-musician responds to prayer. Her melodies are softer, written for the average voice. They come out of the 1960s. They resonate for the Baby Boomers…and she’s put her finger on texts that people want to sing over and over.”[129] While she was hesitant to sing at the Cantors Assembly convention in front of a room of traditional cantors, many of whom looked down upon her music, Friedman knew this was a chance to demonstrate how singable, contemporary melodies can exist alongside traditional music.

Mendelson recalls Friedman nervously getting up to sing her “V’shamru” at the convention while Cantor Samuel Rosenbaum, the executive vice president of the Cantors

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[126] *Sing Unto God: The Debbie Friedman Anthology,* xviii.

[127] J.J. Goldberg, "Debbie Friedman finally winning respect from cantors," *Connecticut Jewish Ledger,* April 16, 1999.

[128] Goldberg, "Debbie Friedman”

[129] Goldberg, "Debbie Friedman”

Assembly at the time, sat angrily with his arms crossed in the front row. As Mendelson introduced Freidman on stage, a person in the back began booing. Mendelson recalls, "Debbie, shaken but determined, then began. It took her ten minutes to win them over."[130] Friedman's "V'shamru" is a gentle, flowing piece that incorporates elements of Jewish modes into a singable, accessible melody. It was a fitting choice for the convention as it demonstrated the practice of interweaving innovation with tradition. Mendelson recalls, "Samuel Rosenbaum, who fiercely hated camp music and looked down upon Debbie Friedman, was in tears by the end of the piece…and of course we were all thinking it led perfectly into *Chatzi Kaddish* in the Shabbos *nusach*."[131] Friedman's emotionally-stirring melody, combined with the sensitivity and care in which she presented it, had a profound impact on the cantors who had once dismissed her as a guitar-playing songleader who did not care about the integrity of Jewish music. Her work emphasized the idea that captivating, accessible melodies can exist alongside tradition, and that the interweaving of styles is essential in creating a communal prayer space that is both engaging and inclusive.

A Teacher and A Learner

Mendelson continued to learn from Friedman while serving on the faculty with her in the School of Sacred Music at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. In watching Friedman work with students, he noticed her impeccable ear for harmony as she seamlessly accompanied students on the guitar while they improvised vocally. Mendelson recalls, "One day just casually she said, 'You know Jackie, I'd like to come

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[130] *Sing Unto God: The Debbie Friedman Anthology*, xix.
[131] Jack Mendelson, interview by Becky Mann, July 10, 2022.

and kick around nusach with you,' and I thought, 'That would be fabulous!'"[132] The two developed an unlikely friendship, yet one that made perfect sense in a world where both spiritual leaders valued music as a central part of engaging people in worship. Mendelson and Friedman met regularly to learn from one another, sitting together with a siddur at the piano as Mendelson taught Friedman *nusach* in the traditional modes, and she taught him ways to weave in new, contemporary melodies. Like Friedman, Mendelson believed that prayer should be relevant to the place and time in which people are living. In his own words, "I'm a big believer in the *nusach* taking on the characteristics of the place where we live…We live in America. It should sound like America."[133] Mendelson explained how even the great Sulzer and Lewandowski harmonized their prayer settings in the style of their home musical culture, namely Schubert and Mendelssohn.[134] He recognized the importance of expanding the soundscape of the synagogue to include music that reflected the style of the surrounding culture, creating what he called an "American *nusach*" that honored both the past and the present.

Friedman admired Mendelson as both a teacher of tradition and someone willing to lean into the present, stating, "I have such great respect for him because he's so knowledgeable and he's so not arrogant about what he knows, and he's so wanting to share what he knows….and he also wants to learn what I have to teach. He knows very well that I'm not interested at all in throwing away tradition, but I'm also not interested in throwing away all the numbers of people who can't relate or connect with the tradition."[135] Mendelson and Friedman both shared a deep appreciation of the way music

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[132] Coppel, *A Journey of Spirit,* 2005.
[133] Coppel, *A Journey of Spirit*, 2005.
[134] *Sing Unto God: The Debbie Friedman Anthology,* xviii.
[135] Coppel, *A Journey of Spirit,* 2005.

could bring text to life. While they came from different backgrounds, they shared a common goal of wanting to help others find meaning and connection through the rich tapestry of Jewish music. For Mendelson, that meaning came from davening in the traditional *nusach.* For Friedman, it came from communal singing, yet in the words of Cohen, "Friedman's work ultimately highlights how important it is to view musical tradition as a dynamic coexistence of multiple practices."[136] Friedman opened a door of possibilities for Jewish composers to meld musical styles within worship, inspiring them to broaden their idea of synagogue music and to bring their own unique voice to the evolving world of Jewish music.

Contemporary Impact

Inspired by Friedman's compositions, Cantor Jonathan Comisar remarked that "being aware and stepping into her world of melody was influential" for him as a composer. As a cantor and composer who writes music for the synagogue, Comisar stated, "She had such a gift for melody, which is no small thing. Something that caught you, something that touched your heart, that had an arc and went somewhere—all of that counted for a lot. On some level I registered that if I want to write music for the synagogue, there has to be something captivating and melodic about it, and something of integrity."[137] While some might have viewed her melodies as simple because of their singability, Comisar saw Friedman's music as sophisticated.

In addition to working as a composer, Comisar is a prolific arranger of both choral and instrumental music. He comes from a musical theater background and many of his

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[136] Cohen,"A Life Transcribed," 260.
[137] Comisar, 2022.

compositions are written in a classical to contemporary musical theater style. Just as Friedman brought a new folk sound to the synagogue, Comisar strives to bring a fresh, innovative sound to synagogue music through his contemporary compositions and arrangements. Friedman's impact inspired him to compose in a style that resonates with the modern-day, progressive synagogue goer. While Comisar was inspired by Friedman's ability to write a melody that "satisfies and delivers," he was equally influenced by her creative, interpretive English lyrics. Inspired by the direct and conversational nature of her lyrics, Comisar compares Friedman's interpretive English to impactful musical theater lyrics, stating, "the lyrics have to speak quickly and land directly, and her lyrics always do. Whether it's something like 'The Latke Song' or 'L'chi Lach,' she knows how to be direct and economical in her lyric writing. It's crafted concisely and artfully."[138]

Many of Comisar's liturgical compositions contain creative, English lyrics, such as his setting of "Modim Anachnu Lach." The traditional text of this prayer acknowledges and thanks God as the Rock and Shield of our lives in every generation, and for blessing us with the wondrous deeds and miracles we experience everyday. Comisar's composition contains the traditional Hebrew text of the *Modim* prayer interspersed with creative English lyrics. The English in his piece is not a direct translation of the Hebrew, but a modern interpretation of the miracles a person experiences in everyday life. The first verse of his English is as follows:

> For the sun that rises in the east, for the seas that roar a prayer
> For the stillness of a snowfall, for a breath of autumn air
> For the grasp within my fingers, for a mind that makes me whole
> For the voice that God has given me to speak the truth within my soul[139]

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[138] Comisar, 2022.

[139] Jonathan Comisar, "Modim Anachnu Lach," *Shabbat Anthology Volume VI,* ed. Jayson Rodovsky and Michael Boxer, Transcontinental Music Publications: 2010.

With his modern interpretation of *Modim*, Comisar's lyrics resonate with a modern-day congregation. His poetic English encourages people to notice and appreciate the everyday miracles present in their lives and the world around them, elevating and personalizing this moment of thanksgiving in the service. The piece is written in a musical theater style, beginning in a contemplative, reflective nature with the English taking on a conversational tone. The Hebrew text serves as the chorus of the piece, returning several times and building in dynamics and intensity before returning to a contemplative place of gratitude at the end of the song. The song is singable yet sophisticated, a style in which Comisar defines Friedman's compositions and strives to bring to his own songwriting. Comisar's intention is that his music—like Friedman's—will not replace tradition but exist alongside it as he follows her example in weaving a new, contemporary fabric into the rich tapestry of Jewish music.

Weaving of Musical Styles

While some cantors feared the idea of incorporating new melodies that strayed from the traditional *nusach* and Classical Reform pieces, others embraced the idea of interweaving singable melodies with tradition. Ordained in 1972 and serving as the youth group advisor in his first cantorial pulpit, Cantor Howard Stahl became aware of Friedman's music while taking his youth group to Kutz Camp in Warwick, NY. A newly ordained cantor who had studied the classics of Jewish music but was unfamiliar with contemporary and popular music, Stahl quickly realized the music heard at Kutz was of a unique genre, stating, "It was infectious, it was powerful, it could evoke tears or cheers. It could rouse and engage even the most cynical of teens. It was, quite simply,

magical…Who was the composer of much of this music? It was a young woman in her early twenties by the name of Debbie Friedman."[140] Stahl observed firsthand the way Friedman's music resonated with teens and made them feel connected to their Judaism in a way they were not experiencing in the synagogue. At camp, prayer came to life in the familiar folk style that encouraged communal singing, while in the synagogue people felt more like observers as they listened to the cantor chant in modes foreign to their ears. Stahl knew that in order to engage the growing population of progressive Jews who felt disconnected from tradition, he needed to find a way to incorporate contemporary music into synagogue services.

In 1972, Stahl collaborated with his classmate and colleague, Cantor Bruce Benson, to compose a folk-rock Shabbat service that fused tradition with innovation. The service, titled *Ma'agal Chozer (Circle Without End)* is based on the vast musical heritage of biblical cantillation, traditional *nusach*, and new folk melodies. Stahl composed the service "to prove that our tradition is indeed compatible with the musical expression of today's youth. Thus the music itself reflects our basic theme, namely that, as time goes, only the manner of expression changes, not the essential concepts or values."[141] The service, freely based on the words of Kohelet and incorporating motifs of Kohelet trope throughout, stresses the point that there is really "nothing new under the sun."[142] The service was written for cantor, youth choir and band including the use of guitar, drums, piano and flute to link the contemporary musical scene of the 1970s with ancient Jewish musical tradition. Stahl believes "*Ma'agal Chozer* is a service for today, based on

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[140] Howard Stahl, "In Memoriam: Debbie Friedman," personal tribute, January 2011.

[141] Howard Stahl and Bruce Benson, *Ma'agal Chozer: Circle Without End*, New Horizons Music Publications. Flushing, NY., 1972.

[142] *Ma'agal Chozer*, 1972

yesterday and aiming for tomorrow."[143] The creation of the service reflected his commitment to both innovation and tradition as a young cantor—a quality that has remained a central part of his cantorate throughout his fifty-year career.

In 1999, Stahl became the cantor of Congregation B'nai Jeshurun in Short Hills, New Jersey. A historically classical Reform congregation, Stahl was hired to help transition Shabbat worship from the older, more formal model to a more participatory, contemporary model. The first person he turned to to assist with this mission was Friedman, whom he brought to the synagogue as an artist-in-residence several times over the course of his first few years. In 2002, Friedman joined Stahl every other month to lead a special Shabbat service with a band called "Shabbat B'Shir." At the time, this was a foreign concept to a congregation used to only hearing organ on Shabbat, yet the service quickly became a highlight in the community and a regular part of their Shabbat worship. Stahl admired the way Friedman wasn't afraid of change. She taught him that "tradition endures and tradition emerges," a lesson that has helped to shape his work as both an innovator and preserver of cantorial tradition.[144]

Upon completing his ten-year stint as Executive Vice President of the Reform movement's American Conference of Cantors, Stahl invited Freidman to address the membership at the Reform cantorate's annual convention in Massachusetts in 1999. Stahl knew Friedman long faced resistance from cantors who viewed her with suspicion and fear, many of whom believed "she was overturning the established order and that the movement sold out to a guitar-strumming song leader who might be sounding the death knell of the cantorate."[145] However, Stahl understood that fear had a way of blinding the

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[143] *Ma'agal Chozer*, 1972
[144] Howard Stahl, interview by Becky Mann, September 17, 2022.
[145] Stahl, "In Memoriam," 2011.

eye and obscuring rational thought, and he believed if his colleagues could get a glimpse into the soul of the remarkable person he'd come to know, their opinions would change. Stahl stated, "It wasn't until I was introduced to her and encountered first-hand her gentle demeanor, her soulful presence, her sharp wit, her courage, and her deep spiritual connection to Judaism and the Jewish people that I realized we had missed the mark….So, with trepidation, she came to Massachusetts and the cantorate, as I had, fell in love with Debbie Friedman and embraced her with love, respect, and admiration."[146]

Continued Legacy

Though she passed away in 2011, Friedman's influence on the interweaving of musical styles within worship continues to inspire both cantors and composers. For her first yahrzeit in 2012, Mendelson shared a setting of Friedman's setting of "Modim," in which he interspersed her contemporary, singable melody with traditional *nusach*. He has continued to use the arrangement on Shabbatot and at conferences to display how the inclusion of contemporary music in worship does not equal the exclusion of traditional *nusach*, but enhances it. Friedman gave Mendelson the courage to experiment with this weaving of styles. Impacted by her influence, he stated, "I found that even if I wasn't in the *nusach*, I could bring a tune in from the *nusach*, and return quite easily with a little musical thought and preparation."[147]

Mendelson carries on Friedman's legacy by sharing the lessons learned from her with the next generation. He co-teaches a course at Hebrew Union College with Elana Arian titled "Cantorial Improvisation and Integration." The class is offered to fifth-year

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[146] Stahl, "In Memoriam," 2011.
[147] *Sing Unto God: The Debbie Friedman Anthology,* xviii.

students in their final year of cantorial school and focuses on the integration of cantorial improvisation in contemporary worship. Both Mendelson and Arian come from improvisational backgrounds; Mendelson is skilled in improvising *nusach* within the traditional modes, and Arian is skilled with instrumental and vocal improvisation in the contemporary folk and jazz genres. In co-teaching the course, they combine their perspectives to offer a unique experience to cantorial students and teach them how to integrate styles of music in worship through improvisation. Friedman served as an inspiration to both Mendelson and Arian in the creation of this course, which they see as a way to carry on her legacy by teaching the next generation of Jewish musical leaders to think creatively about the ways tradition and innovation can exist side-by-side.

In the words of composer and Cantor Benjie Ellen Schiller, "Debbie gave us the courage to write a tune," something many classical and traditional composers of Jewish music did not see as a part of the musical landscape of the synagogue prior to Friedman's influence.[148] Schiller's setting of "Kaddish D'rabanan" incorporates traditional *nusach* taught to her by her teacher, Cantor Israel Goldstein, and weaves it in with a congregational melody that serves as the refrain of the piece. The song alternates between *nusach* and a communal melody—as well as Hebrew and English—displaying a seamless integration of styles. *Kaddish D'rabanan*, a prayer for teachers, is a fitting text for Schiller's composition, as Friedman was a teacher to so many composers whom she inspired to broaden their understanding of synagogue music.

Though she faced criticism from cantors and scholars throughout much of her career, Friedman never let the voices of opposition bring her down. She once remarked that "rather than seeing me as a whole person, I've been perceived as a renegade,

[148] Schiller, 2022.

someone outside the system…That is nonsense. The issue is whether we're reaching people and helping them pray. Whatever we can do to facilitate their worship experience and spiritual self-exploration, we're obligated to do."[149] Friedman's unapologetic presence and commitment to accessibility and inclusion within worship inspired composers who did not fit the traditional mold to bring their own unique voice to the synagogue. In the words of Elana Arian, "The acknowledgement that there's value in people expanding the sound of the Jewish people in a modern way, the idea that you might be able to bring that to places that don't have access to it, the idea that you can not be a clergy person and still have insight into something valuable….all of that exists because of Debbie."[150]

Following her death in January of 2011, the School of Sacred Music at Hebrew Union College was renamed in honor of Friedman, henceforth becoming the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music. The renaming of the school symbolizes the continued commitment of the DFSSM to instill in future cantors both a legacy of traditional cantorial music as well as the evolving landscape of contemporary Jewish music. The integration of musical styles within the college that bears Friedman's name is undoubtedly a symbol of her profound influence on the world of Jewish music and those who carry on her legacy.

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[149] Sue Fishkoff, "Renegade Artist," *The Jerusalem Post,* July 19, 2007. https://www.jpost.com/arts-and-culture/music/renegade-artist

[150] Arian, 2022.

Conclusion: Go Unto Yourself

Memorial Concerts

Following her death in 2011, hundreds of memorial tributes and concerts were held in synagogues and Jewish communities around the country to honor the tremendous impact Friedman had on the Jewish world. Colleagues, students and friends of Friedman gathered together to sing her songs and share their memories. In his article on the life and legacy of Debbie Friedman, Joshua A. Edelman states, "It is likely no surprise that these concerts were often participatory, with as many as a dozen musicians onstage at once, drums and tambourines handed out to the audience so they could not just sing but play along, too."[151] The participatory nature of the memorial concerts was symbolic of Friedman's influence, as Edelman observed, "progressive Jews have unquestionably embraced Friedman's musical techniques for building, connecting, and nurturing communities, and they turned to these techniques to memorialize her."[152] Friedman's music spoke to a need for a feeling of spiritual togetherness that was profound and pressing, one that allowed people to lift their voices in song and find hope and healing in the power of singing together.

While the memorial concerts and tributes were filled with the sadness of Friedman's loss, there was also a great deal of laughter and fond memories as people recalled the humorous, witty, and joyful presence that was Debbie Friedman. The music, memories, and mood at these memorial concerts reflected the spirit of Friedman as those in attendance embodied the words of one of her most popular songs and turned their

[151] Joshua A. Edelman, "The Debbie Friedman Problem: Performing Tradition, Memory, and Modernity in Progressive Jewish Liturgy," *Liturgy* 28.1 (2013): 13.

[152] Edelman, "The Debbie Friedman," 15.

"mourning into dancing." In the words of Edelman, "We might be thirty-five years after those initial campfire song circles in Wisconsin, but that was the performative practice in which we found ourselves inevitably returned." The difference, Edelman writes, was that "these concerts were not held in concert halls or around campfires. They were performed in the sanctuaries of synagogues."[153] The very place where Friedman first felt disconnected and longed to find a sense of belonging—the synagogue—has since become the place where her music and the music of those she inspired has become a fully integrated part of communal worship. As her friend and colleague Deborah E. Lipstadt wrote, "there is an intangible element…It shaped Debbie Friedman's career, her life, and the impact she had on countless people. She had a singular ability to turn an audience into a congregation."[154]

Friedman as a Teacher

While Friedman's legacy lives on in the music she wrote and the music she inspired, her impact as a teacher is truly what had the greatest effect on those around her. Rabbi Mark Shapiro, who was present when Friedman first taught her *Sing Unto God* service to campers at OSRUI in 1972, remarked how Friedman "embodied a new image of the songleader as someone who not only taught song, but was a teacher."[155] She touched hearts at conferences, camps and congregations as an artist-in-residence. She gave meaning to ancient words leading Jewish rituals and healing services, and she inspired the next generation to think deeply, creatively, and innovatively at Hava Nashira and at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.

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[153] Edelman, "The Debbie Friedman," 14.
[154] Lipstadt, "'And It Not Be Stilled,'" 118.
[155] Cohen, "A Life Transcribed," 29.

Cantor Jeff Klepper, who co-founded Hava Nashira with Friedman in 1992, stated, “she taught her students how to dig into the soul of a song to discover the revelations hidden within its simple notes and chords.”[156] Klepper, who knew Friedman for over forty years, was consistently inspired by her teachings. In 1988, Friedman joined Klepper for Shabbat Shirah at Beth Emet Synagogue in Evanston, IL. Just before the service, she asked his permission to lead their performance of "Shalom Rav," a piece he had co-written with Rabbi Danny Freelander. Klepper recalled, “Later during the service I understood why—she had created her own interpretation of our song. When Debbie sang ‘Shalom Rav,’ slowly and prayerfully, she would pause for several seconds after each verse, before the chorus…the long rests Debbie added to ‘Shalom Rav,’ the spaces between the notes, are very spiritual moments and a reminder to all of us that it's not *what* you sing, but *how* you sing that makes all the difference.”[157]

Her impact as a teacher expands in so many directions, “yet beyond Friedman’s competence in teaching lines and harmonies lay a deeper sense of purpose.”[158] Even more than the music, people valued what they remembered as “Friedman’s extraordinary humanity and generosity of spirit, spurred by her express determination to create music that brought people deeply into her interpretation of the liturgy.”[159] Her commitment to helping people connect to prayer through new interpretations and through the powerful act of singing together is a commitment that lives on through the work of those touched by her influence. Inspired by Friedman as a teacher and friend, Cantor Ellen Dreskin remarked, "Life is a journey that we are on together—Debbie wrote from her own

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[156] Klepper, “Visions,” 273.
[157] Klepper, “Visions,” 277.
[158] Cohen, “Sing Unto God,” 22.
[159] Cohen, “Sing Unto God,” 22.

experiences and it's our responsibility to share our own experiences with others, to show vulnerability, to communicate as clearly as possible."[160] Friedman's vulnerability, authenticity and commitment to staying true to herself shined through her music, and even more so in the way she lived her life. In the words of Julie Silver, "she taught me that the person I actually am on stage is the person that I am….no matter where you are in the world, you gotta be who you are."[161] A revolutionary figure in the Jewish world, Friedman carved a path that did not yet exist. In doing so, she gave those around her the courage to embrace their own uniqueness, echoing her midrash on *Parshat Lech L'cha*—the call to "go unto yourself." In the words of Friedman, "I really believe that each of us is an instrument of God, and we've been given certain gifts, like we're not here for a free ride. We've been given gifts that we need to use to partake in *tikkun olam*—in repairing the brokenness in the world."[162]

Personal Reflection

I never met Debbie Friedman, and yet, I feel she is a part of my journey as a composer, musician, and cantor. While our paths never crossed, I have come to know Friedman through the inspiration she imparted upon my teachers and mentors, who in turn are inspiring the next generation by teaching and embodying the lessons she instilled in them. Friedman's impact on the world of Jewish music continues to reverberate through the creation of new music. It would be rare to walk into a progressive American synagogue today and not hear a melody by Debbie Friedman or by a composer whom she inspired. Accessibility, inclusion, healing, interpretation, and innovation interwoven with

[160] Dreskin, 2021.
[161] Silver, 2022
[162] Coppel, *A Journey of Spirit*, 2005.

tradition are central values that form the basis for the music of progressive synagogues, summer camps, and Jewish communities today. As new music emerges, Friedman's impact remains present in the work of composers and spiritual leaders inspired by her attention to these themes, shaping the musical culture of American Judaism. In the words of Cantor Howard Stahl, "For as long as her songs are sung, for as long as we are committed to the values she embodied, for as long as we remember and are inspired by the gifts of her heart and mind and soul, Debbie Friedman will have achieved a measure of immortality which death cannot sever."[163] Twelve years after her passing, the ripples of Friedman's influence continue to inspire composers from generation to generation. As Rabbi Samuel E. Karff stated, "Debbie Friedman raised a younger generation of composers and cantors deeply influenced by her life and work. Her spirit abides not only in the cantorial school that bears her name, but in the fruits of her special gifts which continue to bless us."[164]

This thesis offers a snapshot into the personal and musical impact Friedman had on a generation of Jewish liturgical composers, and the ripple effect her influence continues to have on the next generation. In studying the vastness of Friedman's impact on the music and lives of those inspired by her, we can better understand this revolutionary teacher who changed the nature of communal worship. Friedman remains one of the most influential Jewish musicians of all time, evident in the profound and widespread impact her legacy continues to have on the evolving world of Jewish music. According to Cohen, "Friedman's life leaves an immense, unwritten archive of personal memories and informal recordings…scholars face the challenge of collecting and

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[163] Stahl, "In Memoriam, " 2011.
[164] *Sing Unto God: The Debbie Friedman Anthology,* xvii.

preserving this archive through creative ethnographical research. Through such a process we can begin to create a transcript of Friedman's life and work, in the hope of understanding more completely a crucial era of social and musical transition."[165] My hope is that this thesis helps to contribute to this transcript—one that gives insight into the composer, songleader, teacher and spiritual leader who lives on in the music and hearts of all whom she inspired to go forth, and sing unto God a new song.

[165] Cohen, "A Life Transcribed," 261.

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