# DEBBIE FRIEDMAN

by DEBRA NUSSBAUM COHEN

When Debbie Friedman takes the stage, the singer-songwriter feels she is doing more than performing. For her, bringing music to people is a holy act.

"You can't imagine what it feels like to be standing up there and feel this wall of sound coming at me when everyone is singing back at me. You just know the *shechina* is there. I feel the divine presence," says the dark-haired soprano in an interview in her Upper West Side apartment. "And if people let themselves, they know it's there, too."

Friedman, born in 1952, is the first female composer to contribute significantly to popular Jewish liturgy. She began writing original music as a young woman in the early 1970s, when she first took conventional prayers and stories from the Torah and set them to completely new, folk music-inspired tunes. Her words usually blend

Hebrew and English, are based on traditional prayers and texts, and are laid out along simple, euphonious melodies.

From the start, her music has provided more than lyrics and a melody; for many listeners, her singularly accessible music is a conduit to the divine. Even people who have never opened a prayer book say they find themselves enveloped in Friedman's songs, and deeply feel their meaning. "Melody transcends intellect, transcends all the blocks that we put in our way," explains Friedman.

"People come to her services and weep, they just weep," says Angela Warnick Buchdahl, a Reform rabbi and cantor who includes Friedman's songs in every service she leads at Manhattan's Central Synagogue. "She has opened up a way of prayer-leading in which she bares her soul, in a way that invites other people to be able to do the same.

"When I was a girl I joined a Jewish choir in Tacoma, Washington. We sang Debbie Friedman songs, her early stuff like 'Sing Unto God.' For me that was a spiritual revelation, of joy of singing to God. I enjoyed singing before, but this was the way, through the music, that I connected spiritually to my Jewishness, in a way I wasn't getting when I went to services," says Warnick Buchdahl. "Debbie has this whole body of upbeat, joyous, contemporary music. She taps into this part of you that wants to leap and get up and dance. There are the two sides of Debbie – the part that can access the joy and the part of her that can access the pain."

Friedman has recorded twenty-two albums, with two more, one based on the *Shacharit* morning service and another about Chanukah, in the works. She's performed countless concerts at venues ranging from Carnegie Hall to Jewish overnight camps to intimate gatherings for healing services. Her lyrics are featured on Hallmark cards. It is perhaps because her songs are so much part of contemporary Jewish life, so ubiquitous, that people singing them sometimes don't know who authored them.

"Anywhere you go today, except in the Orthodox community, which it hasn't reached, you are sure to hear Debbie Friedman's music," says Jonathan Sarna, a scholar of American Jewish history who

discusses Friedman's impact in his 2004 book *American Judaism: A History*. "She really brings a kind of soul back into Jewish music. Her music has the authenticity that comes from someone who knows Jewish music and Jewish tradition. At the same time, she offers music that resonates to contemporary ears."

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As a child, Friedman was more religiously inclined than the rest of her family, which included her parents, two sisters, and a brother. Born in Utica, New York, she and her family moved to St. Paul, Minnesota when Friedman was five years old. In Utica, her father had been a kosher butcher and the family belonged to a traditional congregation, but once they moved he switched jobs and they joined a Reform synagogue. Friedman, however, insisted on going to Hebrew school at a nearby Conservative synagogue, and on Saturday mornings walked to *shul* (synagogue).

Even as a very young child she showed musical promise, singing along with symphony recordings at just eighteen months. In her teens, Friedman taught herself to play guitar one summer at Camp Herzl in Webster, Wisconsin because, "there was a person who played and I just wanted to play like she did. It looked like fun," she says. "I just picked it up and started to play." It was 1967, a time when she was listening to Peter, Paul and Mary, Judy Collins, and other popular folk musicians.

The music Friedman loved was a major influence on what was to come. "It was the message of the folk music of the time, and the music itself. It was inclusive and it had substance. [Rabbi Abraham Joshua] Heschel has this quote saying that praying is subversive to undermine all the callousness and pain and awful things there are in the world, and the music of those times did that too. Not every folksinger took that tack, but most of the people I followed did," she says.

Friedman attended a Reform movement youth group retreat the next summer, where she was asked to lead songs, and was then sent to a workshop for song leaders. That same summer she also attended an arts workshop where she was asked to cover for the

song leader, who became ill. Friedman found herself in front of the youth group, explaining each song, teaching them the melody, lyrics, cadence and meaning. "I song-led, not knowing what I was doing," Friedman recalls. The next summer the camp invited her back as one of three national song leaders.

Soon afterwards, in 1970, Friedman began writing original music. The first music she wrote was "*v'Ahavta*," putting music to the second paragraph of the prayer, *Sh'ma*, which states, "And you shall love God with all your heart." She wrote it while on a bus from New Jersey to the Port Authority.

"I taught it to these kids about a month later at a regional youth convention. 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, and it was ours in a musical language they were able to understand," she says. "We were reclaiming something that we hadn't touched, that we had no access to until now."

It wasn't long after that she had a realization that set the course for her future career. She was attending a service at her family's synagogue, Mt. Zion Temple, a Reform congregation in St. Paul. "The choir sang, the rabbi spoke, and I was really passive. I realized I hadn't sung. It's like going to the gym and having someone else do the exercises for you," she says.

This insight spurred her to write music for an entire service, music that everyone could and should sing together.

At the time, Friedman, who didn't attend college, was working at Powers Associated Dry Goods, a St. Paul department store, where they put her in the Christmas Department, counting Christmas tree decorations and setting up the Nativity scene – "I had to ask people where the Wise Men went," she says, laughing. She skipped coffee and lunch breaks, instead saving up the time to leave work each afternoon and go to the high school she had attended to teach the choir the music she was writing.

When she finished enough music for an entire service, which she called *Sing Unto God*, Mt. Zion Temple let her lead it there. The tunes she wrote put new music to traditional hymns and prayers –

"*L'cha Dodi*," "*Barchu*," "*Sh'ma*," "*Aleinu*" and "*Bayom Hahu*." She was twenty-one, and the next year, *Sing Unto God* became her first recording.

"At the time I had no idea what I was creating," she says. But others did. "People started asking me to come do services at different synagogues. From the very beginning I was traveling all over the country singing, leading services and song-leading at Conservative and Reform synagogues," she says – activities and a type of itinerary that has continued throughout her career.

"It was a whole world of text that needed to be set to music. It was wide open. Kids were singing prayers and we weren't using James Taylor tunes anymore," says Friedman of those first years. "We were using *tefilla* now, and it was really working. People were really singing and *davening* and it was exciting."

Soon after that, in 1973, Sam Karff, a Reform rabbi who had a synagogue in Chicago, commissioned her to compose a Chanukah cantata for his congregation. "He said, 'I don't want what happened to Irving Berlin to happen to you,'" she remembers. "He said, 'I want you to continue to write Jewish music and stay with us.'" His invitation spurred her to put out her second album, *Not By Might, Not By Power* (1974).

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Her creative process "varies from day to day, and minute to minute, and song to song," she says. "It's never one way. Sometimes the words come first, and sometimes the melody comes first. It's a creative process, not a fixed one."

For instance, her adaptation of "*Mi Chamocha*" ("Who is Like You, God?") came to Friedman while she was strumming the Neil Young 1970s hit "A Horse With No Name." "Playing the chords it just turned into '*Mi Chamocha*,'" she recalls.

Another early project, in 1973, was a suite based on Song of Songs – "*Kumi Lach*," ("Arise My Love") and "*Dodi Li*," ("My Beloved is Mine") among others – written to comfort her aunt and cousins after the death of her uncle.

"The thing that inspires me," she says, "is people."

When two California-based friends of hers, Savina Teubal and Marcia Cohn Spiegel, decided to mark their sixtieth birthdays in 1986 by creating a new ritual called a *simchat chochmah* (celebration of wisdom), Friedman wrote music to accompany the ceremony, songs which today are among her best-loved and most often sung.

For Teubal's ritual, believed to be the first simchat chochmah ever held, Friedman wrote "*Bruchot habaot*" ("May the Ones Who Come Forth Be Blessed"), "*L'chi Lach*" ("Go for Yourself"), and "*Kaddish derabbanan*" ("The Rabbis' Blessing"). For Spiegel's ceremony, Debbie wrote "Miriam's Song," now the classic accompaniment to women's seders, and "*Mishebeyrach*" ("He Who Has Blessed"), which has become the core of novel Jewish healing services that are springing up around the country.

Recalling the genesis of "*Mishebeyrach*," Friedman says, "The morning of [Spiegel's] event I went to the traditional text and just translated it. We put a tallis on and I said to the congregation we were going to do it and if anyone wanted to come under the tallis they should join us. Like 150 people came up. That's the day that the Jewish healing movement began. I have goose bumps even now. It was the day people said aloud, 'I need help, I need healing.'" "*Mishebeyrach*" is arguably Friedman's most famous song, and the tune is now routinely sung in Reform and other synagogues as part of Shabbat services.

The healing movement itself has also taken off, with close to forty Jewish spiritual healing centers organized nationwide, according to the National Center for Jewish Healing, in addition to the healing services that individual synagogues may run. The services focus on prayer, singing, and group fellowship, and like Friedman's song, which is featured at almost every one of these services, they help people find a healing of their spirit as they ask God to heal their bodies.

For over a decade, Friedman and Rabbi Michael Strassfeld have run a monthly Jewish spiritual healing gathering in Manhattan, where people dealing with challenges like cancer and depression come to join her in song and meditation, and leave feeling

strengthened and consoled. The gathering currently takes place at The Jewish Community Center in Manhattan.

"She really allows people to feel they can be stronger and strengthened by being able to admit and share and get support for the things that make them vulnerable. That's her great gift," says Warnick Buchdahl.

Friedman's own experience with chronic health problems has created a sensitivity to those who are ill, an ability to understand the feelings of fragility, struggle, and desperation that those with illnesses can feel. For years, she has battled a debilitating neurological condition diagnosed as paroxysmal dyskinesia, combined with ongoing adrenal and endocrine problems. In 1988, after taking an incorrectly prescribed combination of drugs, her legs suddenly went rigid. She's experienced a roller coaster of medical crises ever since, occasionally confined to a wheelchair, bed or hospital.

"My biggest challenge is this chronic battle with my body and its vulnerability," she says. "I can't do all the things I used to do. I try to keep everything in balance. My life is like a juggling act. I try to stay healthy enough to do all the things I want to do, and abide by my body's limitations."

Friedman's deeply affecting "*Mishebeyrach*," an embracing plea for healing, is sung in places large and small, in major concert halls and in cramped hospital rooms. "For people who have had illness, you look at Debbie Friedman and say wow, look what she overcame," notes Sarna. "People who have grappled with life-threatening illness but have carried on in public are tremendous role models for the community at large."

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Friedman integrates a feminist perspective in everything she writes, with mentions of the biblical matriarchs and references to God in feminized Hebrew language. Celebrating women, and filling in the white spaces in between the black letters of living Torah, where women's voices and experiences are absent from traditional texts, has spurred Friedman to write many of her best-loved songs.

In 1995, the New York Jewish organization, Ma'yan, invited her to lead their feminist Passover seders, for which she wrote "The Journey Song," "Light These Lights," the gentle "O Hear My Prayer," and her version of "*Birkat Hamazon*," the blessings traditionally sung at the end of a meal. She also integrated some of the music she had previously written, like "*L'chi Lach*."

Once Friedman's powerful, joyous music was part of the Ma'yan seders they became enormously popular, with thousands of women attending each year. She recorded the music on *The Journey Continues* and it was published in the *Ma'yan Hagaddah*, which has sold some forty thousand copies, according to the organization.

Recently, she has written the tender new song, "Like a Rose," or "*K'Shoshana*" in Hebrew, in honor of the birth of Warnick Buchdahl's daughter, which seems sure to become the standard at Jewish baby girls' welcoming ceremonies.

Children also love her songs, especially those she has written for them, like her English and Hebrew versions of "The Aleph-Bet Song," "The Latke Song," and "The Dreidel Song." Her music has been licensed to several kid-related video projects, including *Hanukkah Tales & Tunes* and a *Barney in Concert* video, in which the ubiquitous purple dinosaur sings "The Aleph-Bet Song."

In 1996, Friedman celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of her singing-songwriting career by performing three consecutive sold-out shows at Carnegie Hall, where she prompted people to put their arms around one another and embrace as they swayed to her music.

"I don't think I'll ever forget what it felt like to walk out on the stage of Carnegie Hall," Friedman says. "The ambience was something to behold. The acoustics were phenomenal, the architecture elegant. All of that was seductive and impressive, but as I sang the '*Mishebeyrach*,' I was reminded in that moment that no matter where people gather for prayer it is they who create the warmth, memory and magic of any experience."

Lately, Friedman has also been taking her music and message overseas. In the summers of 2004 and 2007, she traveled with the

organization Project Kesher and about 150 American Jewish women to the former Soviet Union. Among their activities were meetings with local women and an event in which Friedman sang to the assembled group of American and Soviet women on the banks of the Volga River.

She has, of course, been invited as a cantorial soloist at synagogues throughout the country; at many of them her music is now part of their regular liturgy. But her influence is not confined to the Jewish sphere – churches also use Friedman's music for teaching and worship, particularly in their music and youth groups.

In addition to performing, Friedman also teaches. She founded Hava Nashira, an annual song-leading workshop at the Olin-Sang-Ruby Union Institute, and has taught on the faculty at special programs run by a diverse set of institutions, including the Duke University Divinity School, Brandeis University, Franklin Pierce College and Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles.

She is also one of the few women appointed to the Honorary Committee for the Celebration of 350 Years of Jewish Women in North America. Among other awards, she has received the prestigious Covenant Award for outstanding contributions to Jewish education, the Jewish Cultural Achievement Award in Performing Arts from the National Foundation for Jewish Culture and the Jewish Fund for Justice's Women of Valor Award. In 2006, she was given the Burning Bush Award from the University Women of the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, which honors artists for their lifetime contributions to the community; previous recipients include author Isaac Bashevis Singer, painter David Hockney and playwright Neil Simon.

In 2007, she was invited to begin teaching at the Reform movement's cantorial school, Hebrew Union College's School of Sacred Music. Yet, despite all of these ways in which Friedman is being recognized for her contribution to American Jewish life, mainstream commercial success has eluded her.

"If it's meant to be, it's meant to be," she says. "I'm not in this work for fame. Fame is an illusion, it's meaningless. Conquering the world is not our job. Our job is to be the best that you can be. I'm

never going to be more than what I'm going to be, and I'm not going to try."

As Warnick Buchdahl puts it, "She comes up with music you just can't get out of your head." But it's not just about the music. It's about how the music makes people feel.

"I love that I've been given the reward of being the *shlicha* [emissary] of this music, honest to God," Friedman says. "When I die, I want to be remembered not for all the many songs I wrote, but for helping people to feel and be empowered, to know their strengths and to know that special thing about themselves, that they are the most significant and holy being in the world, and that the person next to them is, too."