

it is forgotten and we are forgotten. That, in fact, we are nothing more than dust and ashes.”

In her creativity and passion for life, as well as in her profound doubt, Debbie embodied the essence of the human spirit. Her capacity to inspire the world with her transcendent music had as its foundation a unique insight into the depths and pain, the hopes and fears, of the human soul. Her music and her questions remain a powerful and honest legacy for us all.

These are the questions with which we wrestle — and there is no *nechemta*, consolation, that can completely remove the angst associated with such reflections. Rather, it is through such confession and in the personal scouring and examination of the depths of one’s soul that I find a modicum of relief from the doubt and uncertainty that characterize questions about how to measure the fullness and significance of a life. 

A Prayer for Healing: The Misheberach

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Debbie Friedman understood the dual direction of the Misheberach prayer. For some people — usually — and for all people some of the time, it is a prayer for divine intervention: “God, do something!” For others and almost all of the time, it is more of a communal and public affirmation of hope — binding people together in a sharing of each individual’s particularity. It was Debbie’s genius to bring those two distinct intentions into one explicit expression through a beautiful melody. And when we conclude the prayer with “And let us say, amen,” moist eyes in the congregation affirm that the sacred but sometimes flat routine of prayer has been leavened by personal engagement, gratitude, and outreach to others in the room.

The aspiration for healing and even cure was disappointed this past winter by Debbie’s suffering in a little hospital in Orange County, Calif. But the second direction of the “Misheberach” — the communal affirmation — was not disappointed; people came together in an expression that mirrored the re-creation of Debbie’s prayer. And we continue to honor her memory by examining what it is we do when we pray, “May the One who blessed our ancestors, bless [a certain person] with a complete healing of body and soul.”

In the many congregations I visit each year, I see people who would call themselves skeptics and cynics waiting for the moment in the service when the *shaliach tzibur* (emissary of prayer) turns to them and says something like: “And now with the Torah open before us, we think of those who....” Then, these urbane congregants stand up with a look of innocence on their faces — the elderly and the young, the simple and the wise — to announce the name of someone about whom they are concerned. The Misheberach impulse had, by 1995 or so, migrated throughout *clal Yisrael* because of Debbie

Friedman’s rendition of this ancient prayer.

What is this prayer that we utter? Where does it come from? And how different is its formula from the “traditional formula” we vaguely knew before we heard Debbie’s translation? How did a prayer muttered at the *bima* and barely heard become the central moment in liberal religious ceremony? How did a prayer with so much complex baggage become defined by its healing urgency?

“May the one who blessed our ancestors, bless this friend/sister/parent/colleague, giving a complete healing...and, while you are at it, God, soften the lump in my throat.” The hope for intervention is a vertical approach, a directional description of the clunky word “theurgy” (influencing God’s actions). Engagement with one’s community is the horizontal piece; it’s about shared, participatory and, ultimately, cultural bonding. Because you blessed Abraham and Sarah, O God, bless my cousin who is ill. We cite the biblical patriarchy to affirm that we belong to this community. Two directions are built into the prayer itself: We invoke the ancient community (horizontal) in the hope for divine intervention (vertical). But over time, an attachment to ancestors may have lost strength in our upwardly aimed petition. It may no longer mean that one’s hope is justified by precedent. Now we add a vertical historical connection to the already horizontal and contemporaneous support we find in the communal setting. We may not believe that God will choose to make a Jew in Pittsburgh well, while ignoring a little girl in India; but we know how we hope when our backs are against the wall.

Understanding the Misheberach prayer received a boost in the mid-1950s when Avraham Yaari (and two important scholars after him) published major essays in *Kiryat Sefer*, (the official research organ of the National Library of

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Hear Debbie Friedman sing “Misheberach” on www.shma.com.

Jerusalem). These essays and the inventory of Misheberach prayers surprise us with information about the origins and suppleness of the prayers for healing. Furthermore, our best estimations as to the origin of the prayer (and its original purpose) are contained in the *Kiryat Sefer* material. Research indicates that the prayer originated as a purely theological response in a vein similar to the prayer for rain in a drought: “The One who caused rain will surely be able to bring rain upon....” (*Mishnah Ta’anit*) As time went on, and in communities too various to specify here, the Misheberach evolved from a prayer that blessed a whole community in imitation of Solomon’s prayer for the people, to an occasional prayer that mentioned specific issues in the lives of particular communities. There was even a time — and a few examples remain in documents — when the Misheberach was preceded by the words, “*Yehi ratzon...*” (May it be Your will...)

The prayer seems to have migrated from its origins as a prayer for rain, citing God’s providence in previous circumstances as justification for hoping that such providence would reappear, to a prayer recited in synagogues throughout Europe and the Middle East. It took on various “*nuscha’ot*” (versions) and was chanted for a variety of occasions. The standard formula generally remained — almost always, the prayer was connected to the Torah or Haftarah reading. There are Misheberach prayers for every kind of illness, and almost every kind of relationship; there are Misheberach prayers for people who refrain from gossip, for people who maintain responsible business ethics. There are Misheberach blessings for everyone in the community, but slanderers, gossips, and schlemiels are excluded. And there is even a (most touching) Misheberach for the community of people who disappeared suddenly from Budapest in 1943, in the hope that they would make a swift return.

Debbie’s curiosity drew her to expand the repertory of uses for a healing prayer. Elaborations and innovations, variations on the core theme, seem justified by a slew of historical precedents and particular circumstances. Even the well-considered distinction between “curing” (what doctors do) and “healing” (what we all have to do) emerges as more important through her creative hand.

New research on the prayer is under way — even urging that we consider a revised text for individuals in a liminal state of being maintained in their disease without any acute emergent moment. And recognizing the “inventory”

of public uses becomes a lesson for today’s Jewish student: Whom would you include in a prayer for health? What healing did Jewish tradition ascribe to David, Miriam, Hezekiah, Ben Zakkai, Rabbi Judah? The theurgic aspect of the theology remains problematic for the modern skeptic. But the community vector is powerful enough to drive even the most pessimistic worshipper toward hope. It moves us to stand up in synagogues large and small to wait patiently for that moment when we might announce the name of a sister or brother, a friend or parent.

The communal experience remains especially powerful when one embeds a current hope in a contemporary variation on an original form, or *matbeah*. This has been Debbie’s gift, and it was her quest — especially as she matured as a performer, worshipper, and musician. When we studied this prayer more thoroughly, Debbie was thrilled to learn of each newly discovered nuance: the association with *tzedakah*, the ability to improvise, the spontaneity permitted within the *matbeah*, and even the occasional criticisms of those within the community who felt the prayer lacked authenticity.

As we remember Debbie Friedman, the prayer she fashioned with Drora Setel remains a symbol of disappointed hopes, a prayer unanswered, but a prayer that binds us to each other. Her ultimate wish for us was to remain a community, even when our aspirations weren’t realized. And so, while many of us remain skeptical and disappointed in our hopes for divine intervention, her dream has been satisfied by the way in which thousands have held on to each other since her death.

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