

Azkarah for Debbie Friedman Z"L

Debbie Friedman was a creative genius. Like many trail blazers, her mind didn't work the way most of ours do. She wasn't great writing a syllabus (which she spelled "silly bus") or sticking to it in her teaching. Her check book and appointment book were on life support. Her cell phone was always too full to accept messages. Yet somehow in her compositions, she got to the heart of the liturgical text and expressed it in a way that reached our hearts. Many song writers can claim two or three or even a half dozen songs that made it into the mainstream of Reform usage. Debbie consistently reached us throughout her career because of that ability to write from the heart. As our sages taught, words from the heart reach the heart. She touched many, many people in this way.

I think of the young service man who told me that the only thing that helped him relax enough to fall asleep while fighting in Afghanistan was listening to Debbie's recordings. I think of the Chassidim in Israel who use her Havdalah melody, ignorant of who had written it. I think of the thousands of people who tear up as they listen to her Misheberach.

With her open heart, she reached our students at HUC. She cared about them, came to all of their practica to support them, encouraged them to compose and then cheered them on. She also wanted to keep growing and learning. She sat in on nusach courses, particularly with Izzy Goldstein. It was the thing she missed the most when family circumstances forced her to move to LA in the last year of her life.

I came to know Debbie only when she came to HUC to teach. I will never forget how she lit up the room leading her Psalm 150 during the Kallah that opened the school year. It took about five seconds for her to completely energize the students and faculty and she had had one hour of sleep the night before. Though she struggled with physical ailments that virtually crippled her at times, she was very funny. We often channeled the Marx brothers in our conversations. She was very quick and loved puns. The amazing tribute concert in 2009 at Central Synagogue showed that she could still draw a sell-out crowd. It was a very successful event that involved choirs and cantors from throughout the New York Metropolitan area.

Debbie was modest and would have been extremely embarrassed to have the School of Sacred Music named after her. She wasn't given a choice in the matter. If we can train our students to sing, create, and live from the same authentic place in their hearts as Debbie Friedman did, then the future of the Reform cantorate will be a wonderful one. May her name be remembered always for a blessing!

Cantor Bruce Ruben