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Beloved US Jewish songwriter, Debbie Friedman, dies

By JORDANA HORN
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Singer who changed voice of American Jewish spirituality, prayer dies in California hospital; she had been hospitalized with pneumonia.

NEW YORK – American Jewish singer and songwriter Debbie Friedman, who changed the voice of American Jewish spirituality and prayer, died on Sunday in a hospital in Orange County, California, sources from the Union for Reform Judaism confirmed.

Friedman, who was born circa 1952, had been hospitalized with pneumonia.

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She started writing Jewish liturgical music as a group songleader at the Union for Reform Judaism's Olin-Sang-Ruby Union Institute summer camp in the early 1970s, setting ancient texts to modern, accessible, singable melodies. She published more than 19 albums of music inspired by American folk music greats, using English and Hebrew lyrics and often, the simple accompaniment of a guitar.

Friedman performed to sold-out audiences at New York's Carnegie Hall, as well as in hundreds of other cities around the world. Her musical version of "Mi Sheberah," the prayer for healing, is used by hundreds of congregations across America. According to her website, Friedman's music is performed in synagogues around the world more than that of any other modern composer.

"From the beginning of my career, I've tried to help people see how prayer can be a source of comfort in both good times and bad," Friedman wrote on her website.

"This is particularly the case with my latest CD, As You Go On Your Way: Shaharit – The Morning Prayers, which I hope will give people the opportunity to pray in an intimate and personal way with the goal of helping them get through these difficult times."

Elucidating her philosophy of rendering spirituality more accessible through music, Friedman wrote: "I want to help people to begin their day with an open heart; to learn to pray in a comfortable, non-threatening way.

Maybe, they'll first experience it as music but, over time, they may learn the prayers.

"In this time of tremendous uncertainty, when so many are feeling anxious and stressed, the comfort and

sense of peace that prayer brings is a wonderful thing. To be able to start your day that way, is even better.”

Over the weekend, numerous rabbis told The Jerusalem Post about the tremendous effect Friedman had on them as well as their congregants.

“When I was studying in rabbinical school at the Jewish Theological Seminary in the late '90s, it was not a very spiritual place,” Rabbi Jason Miller of Farmington Hills, Michigan said.

In contrast, he recalled, Friedman came to JTS to lead a healing service after a full-day conference on prayer.

“Her energy electrified the Seminary’s synagogue where students, faculty and guests were singing and dancing – I remember thinking that if I could bottle up her ruah [spiritual energy] and sell it to congregations, I’d be a billionaire,” Miller, who works for the Jewish Tamarack Camps, said.

Friedman’s music, Miller said, “adds so much life and feeling to our liturgy.”

Her ‘Mi Sheberach’ version has inspired Jews all over the world to make a communal prayer for healing a staple of every Shabbat service.”

Cantor Rosalie Boxt of Temple Emanuel in Kensington, Maryland, said she believes Friedman’s potency came from giving ‘voice’ to new and more modern texts and experience, as well as from giving permission to clergy and congregants alike to express themselves fully.

“Her music in many ways has become the tapestry of our people, tells the story of a generation of Jews – through the joy of the State of Israel, of Torah texts that teach values of justice and honor, and tefilot that share express our longing for God,” Boxt said. “Her melodies bring texts to life about women, about hope, about joy and about healing in ways few had done before her.

“Her melodies taught me Jewish texts – Pirkei Avot, Psalms, The Prophets, Torah. Growing up, I learned the words and values of our sacred texts through her stories and songs.”

Boxt was quick to say that Friedman’s strength extended beyond her melodies into her clear love of teaching and music, which she’d communicate to anyone who heard her sing.

“The reason so many around the world feel close to Debbie, and call her ‘friend’ is because she, in leading worship or performance, gives us permission to feel deeply,” Boxt said. “She gives fully of herself and has opened a door for many to share their deepest hurts or their purest joy. She asks people to be open to their truest hearts, to their longing for the Divine, and for the need we have for love and friendship and for each other. There is no pretense with Debbie, and her music and spirit have created a growth in expression in Jewish music, liturgical and non[liturgical], that speaks to a Jewish community that wants to be fully engaged in prayer, in song, and in learning,” she said.

“Debbie teaches me not only through her music, but through her friendship and love, that it is okay to hurt and it is okay to love,” Boxt continued. “She helps me grow as a cantor and a woman, to allow my community to give back to me as much as I may give to it. She continues to inspire me and so many others with her music, her strength, her commitment to Torah and nusah [the style or melody of the prayer service], and to the Jewish people of all backgrounds and experiences.”

Regardless of denominational affiliation, Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson of the American Jewish University in Los Angeles, who holds the Abner & Roslyn Goldstine Dean’s Chair at the school’s Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, said that Friedman “has an impact that transcends all the labels dividing Jewish life.”

“You can measure her reach by the [way] virtually everyone uses her havdala melody, often without knowing it,” Artson said, referring to the prayer marking the transition from Sabbath to a new week. “You can measure her impact by the fact that there is a rich profession of contemporary Jewish music when none existed outside the cantorate before her.

You can measure her gift by the way it feels natural now to learn and sing Torah in women’s voices and in women’s words. And you can savor her gift in the bountiful harvest of her enormous collection of spirited and spiritual songs.”

On a personal note, Artson said that Friedman “touched and elevated” his soul at every conference, adding that her extended ‘Kaddish De-Rabbanan’ sessions “reached the darkest recesses of my heart.”

“Debbie is, and remains, one of a kind,” Artson said.

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