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Turn my mourning into dancing

Thoughts about Debbie Friedman

BY RABBI LAURA GELLER

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My first encounter with Debbie was in 1986 at the Simchat Chockmah ritual for becoming an elder she helped create and lead for the feminist Biblical scholar, her friend, Savina Teubal. Two moments in the ritual took my breath away. The first was in the middle of the ceremony, when Savina put on a kittel, the traditional burial shroud. Without words, that robing communicated the powerful truth that everything changes, and that although this new stage of Savina's life would someday end with her death, she could continue to be a blessing. The second moment was hearing Debbie sing the song she wrote for that moment: "Lechi Lach." "Lechi Lach", like many other of her songs, became constants in the new rituals that a generation of feminist rabbis created to connect girls and women to the divinity present in their lives. And from these rituals, men as well as women learned a new way to connect to God and to make real the truth our tradition teaches that God is present in every moment.

Debbie brought joy to ritual. Over the years she lived in Los Angeles, Debbie and I led many feminist seders together, helping hundreds of women find their seat around the Passover table and take their place in the ongoing Jewish conversation. Women danced to "Miriam's Song," and through Debbie's passion and vision, many found their voice. Others will write about how Debbie changed synagogue music and retaught a generation of Jews how to sing unto God. Her mishebarach is canonical; we could cut out almost any other part of the liturgy, but not the misheberach. She really did teach us through those words that the purpose of prayer is to find the courage to make our lives a blessing, no matter what challenges or losses we confront.

I will miss her irreverent sense of humor and her wonderful playfulness. I so wish I could one day have been part of creating her ceremony for becoming an elder. I am grateful that she was a part of my life. She was, and her memory will continue to be, a blessing.

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