

Musical Midrash

EVAN KENT

L' - chi lach to a land that I will show you Lech l'cha to a place you do not know l' - chi lach on your jour-ney I will bless you

I became acquainted with Debbie Friedman’s music while I was a camper and participant in the National Federation of Temple Youth group during the 1970s. Her music, which touched the soul and heart, provided the soundtrack for much of my adolescence. Only more recently have I begun to understand the technical aspects of the art she created: an intricate musical tapestry of lyrics, melody and supporting harmony. Debbie’s “L’chi Lach” illustrates this fusion of text and music particularly well.

This piece of music functions as a midrash on the biblical story of Abraham’s journey. A continually rising vocal line provides us with a sense of direction and a feeling of moving forward. The story of our ancestors is also one of perseverance; such a vocal line demands just that perseverance from the amateur singer. The musical range pushes the natural limits of what might be considered appropriate for congregational singing. And yet, as it is sung, we don’t give up; rather, we journey forward.

A particularly salient feature of the song is the juxtaposition of the masculine “*lech l’cha*” (which is the name of the Torah portion) with the feminine “*l’chi lach*.” While the phrase “*l’chi lach*” ignores the natural Hebraic word stress — giving the words almost equal value — “*lech l’cha*” more closely mirrors the Hebrew text rhythm. Why did she set these texts this way? Why does she seem to purposely defeat the natural word stress? Perhaps, Debbie is making a radical statement as she announces that the biblical text has been re-imagined, re-envisioned. While the textual proximity of “*l’chi lach*” and “*lech l’cha*” indicates similarity, Debbie is informing the listener that the two phrases are not the same. In a seemingly simple yet extraordinarily elegant musical phrase, Debbie indicates that although these phrases function grammatically in the same

way (second person, singular, command), the feminine form is a midrashic construct. In a powerful, fleeting musical moment, we are transported back through the millennia; we hear our matriarchs called by God to journey forth — even though we know little of their lives from our sacred texts.

This is the power of Debbie’s music — to provide voice to the voiceless and bring those from the margins of society into the larger communal tent of Jewish worship and life. A simple phrase like “*l’chi lach*,” set as eloquently as only Debbie could, tells the listener that we all belong, that we all have a place in our communal storytelling.

The conclusion of each verse of the song reinforces this sense of community:

“And you shall be a blessing / You shall be a blessing / You shall be a blessing, *l’chi lach*.”

Debbie’s choice to exclude “and” from the last two lines of the verse strengthens the message. By leaving out a simple “and,” she acknowledges the imprecise nature of the English language; in turn, she highlights “you.” In Hebrew, the grammar clarifies the subject. But the English “you” is less clear. It is as if Debbie is constructing concentric circles of blessing. The first “you” of “And *you* shall be a blessing” speaks to the individual. The next “you” extends the blessing to the greater community. And perhaps the final “you” extends across space and time as we are joined together with all those souls who seek blessing.

“L’chi Lach” not only exemplifies Debbie Friedman’s gifts as a composer; it also demonstrates her desire that we all recognize the power we have in creating moments of sacredness and blessing in each others’ lives as we journey forward.

Evan Kent has been the cantor at Temple Isaiah in Los Angeles since his investiture from the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion in 1988. Now serving as director of the cantorial music program at HUC–JIR, Kent is on the editorial advisory committee for the new *machzor* being developed by the Central Conference of American Rabbis. He is currently pursuing a doctoral degree in music at Boston University, where his research focuses on informal Jewish music education and its impact on the development of Jewish identity.

Hear Debbie Friedman sing “L’chi Lach” on www.shma.com.