

On Loss, Language and Longing: Civic Society and Faithful Dreams
(Psalm 51; Exodus 3:1-18)

The radio announcer said, “This week is the 25th anniversary of the Challenger Disaster.” I needed no reminder. Like many, I was watching the launch in my living room, poised to celebrate a national achievement. As that celebration turned to tragedy before the eyes of our nation, as I took in the terrible images of the space shuttle breaking up 73 seconds after liftoff over the Florida coast, as I was trying to absorb the shock and horror, the phone rang. It was my brother. My mother, fighting lymphoma, had taken a serious turn for the worse.

I dialed one of my co-workers who was also a travel agent. She not only put George and me on the next flight to Florida; within the hour, she also drove us to the airport. But her speed, kindness, and competence couldn’t overcome the time it took to traverse the country. When I phoned during the layover in the Atlanta airport, I learned that there would be no final goodbye. My mother had just died.

When public loss and private loss fuse, there is a powerful, visceral association. It is as if we know those public figures more intimately, and feel more deeply the impact of their tragedy than reason might suggest. The waves of our grief lap over those we didn’t know, but wish we did, as well as those we knew well and loved. In my mind, my mother was beside the astronauts in John Gillespie Magee, Jr’s beautifully crafted image invoked by President Reagan, “[they] 'slipped the surly bonds of Earth' to 'touch the face of God.’”

Three weekends ago, two sad events again fused public and private loss, as I found myself weeping and wondering where hope could be found. Absorbing the terrible shooting rampage targeting Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, resulting in her critical injury and in the senseless deaths of six of her constituents, among them a young citizen, a federal judge and a congressional staffer, I received the news that my friend Debbie Friedman had died.

Gabrielle Giffords’s shooting would have felt personal, in and of itself. She is a woman for whom I have great respect and admiration. As we now all know, Gabby Giffords is a civic-minded Jewish woman, unafraid to stand by her convictions, even when they are unpopular. And in her childhood, like in mine, she learned to ride horses while learning as well to navigate the larger world from her businessman father. I admire that she was trying to hold civic dialogue with her constituents, willing to engage their concerns, whether they come with compliments or with criticism, meeting them in the errands of their daily lives without filter or spin. She was attempting to foster civic society and be a faithful implementer of their worthy dreams. I, like so many others, immediately started calling her Gabby, not to diminish her stature; but rather as a reflection of how close we feel to her, how appreciative of and connected to her we want to be.

Three weeks ago today, on the day after she was shot, there was a vigil in Gabby

Giffords's synagogue, Congregation Chaverim. These words were heard there.

“We hold Gabby in our hearts this morning. We pray for her *refuah sh'leimah*, her complete healing. Each of us brings a Gabby moment to mind; Gabrielle serving our country with *chain*, G-d's grace, and eloquence. In the Hebrew Bible... King Solomon, asks G-d for the gift of a *lev chacham v'navon*, a wise and an understanding heart. Gabrielle Giffords is also gifted by G-d with a wise and understanding heart, which is always revealed in her wise and understanding smile. Gabby brings her deep and heartfelt smile and greetings to help ease the sense of aloneness in others. With her brilliance of mind, she comes to help solve the problems that hover over all of our lives: loss of jobs, loss of homes, loss of the dignity of being human, loss of habitats, loss of air to breathe and clean water to drink. With her clear head and open heart, she stretches beyond herself to stand in the place of another human being; to enter his suffering, to dwell in her pain, to exclaim unequivocally, I am here. You are not alone...I am here...I am here to stand firmly with you against the plagues that would destroy us: bigotry, hatred, apathy, cruelty, stinginess, mean-spiritedness, and violence. We say to Gabby this morning: ... we are here. We stand with you. We stand with your family. We ask G-d to bring you and all of the people who were shot at your side; bring each one of you a *refuah sh'leimah*, a complete healing, a *refuat nefesh*, a healing of spirit, a *refuat haguf*, a healing of body. ...We are here to support the grieving families whose loved ones were murdered.”

And they sang a prayer of healing, the *mishaberach*. (Debbie Friedman singing)

Mishaberach avotenu, mkor ha bracha l'emotenu

May the Source of Strength who blessed the ones before us
Help us find the courage to make our lives a blessing
And let us say, Amen

Mishaberach imotenu, mkor habracha l'avotenu

Bless those in need of healing with *refuaah sbelema*
The renewal of body, the renewal of spirit
And let us say, Amen

In Tucson, on Sunday morning, January 9th, Gabby's community sang these words of healing, offered and prayed so often that they have become the modern Jewish anthem for healing. This *mishaberach*, based on a traditional Hebrew prayer, was contemporized and composed by liturgist, songwriter and teacher Debbie Friedman. And also on Sunday morning, January 9th, in California, as her music and prayers gave comfort and hope to Gabby's congregation and to so many of us as we held Gabby in our hearts, Debbie Friedman, whose voice you just heard, breathed her last breath.

Whenever Debbie sang that *mishaberach* in community, she would do so in a very particular way. “This is for you,” she would say softly. She wanted us to listen, to take in the words, to receive ourselves a prayer for healing. Only then, did she invite us to sing with her, to lift our voices in prayer for those in our hearts. But Debbie the giver also needed to receive this prayer. Debbie was a healer, but her own body had been broken for many years. Undaunted, her liturgical music transformed contemporary Jewish worship, even as it transformed her from a composer and performer into a teacher and a sage. And so it was

with much pleasure and gratitude that I opened my email on Friday morning to learn that, as a result of a generous gift from Bonnie and Daniel Tisch, my alma mater, the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, has just renamed our cantorial school, The Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music.

When I was a congregational rabbi, Debbie graciously gave a concert at our synagogue in honor of a beloved member dying of cancer. A seven-year old congregant of mine loved her music. His name was Misha, so he thought her *mishaberach* was about him. When he learned it was a prayer for healing, he still liked it. Then his grandfather died. He told his mom that he hated Debbie Friedman. When she asked him why, he said it was because he sang that song and it didn't work. The concept of healing was a bit much for him to understand at age seven. Then Debbie came to sing at Temple Israel and his mother brought him to the concert. Mother and son approached her after the concert and told her this story. Debbie stooped down, put her arms around Misha. "I understand." She said, "I had a grandfather I loved very much and wished that there could have been something that I could have done to help him stay well and live longer." This approachability and lovely embrace, of both children and adults, was characteristic of Debbie Friedman. She composed some of the most sublime liturgical music about God and yearning, blessings and miracles. Yet, she also wrote catchy tunes to memorize the Hebrew alphabet or imagined herself to be the hidden matzah at Passover.

When it comes to august, imposing buildings like Memorial Church, one of my colleagues used to say, "Architecture always wins." But for Debbie, it didn't. In 1991, she welcomed us to "Beit Carnegie"—"Congregation Carnegie," and turned the imposing and hushed Carnegie Hall into a rousing congregation, leading a roomful of people singing with her about potato latkes in a blender, invoking with her the angels that protect us through the night, and praying with her for peace and safe passage.

At her funeral, Rabbi Stuart Kelman, who often taught liturgy with Debbie, reminded us of a teaching by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. "There are three ways to mourn, the first is to cry, the second is to grow silent, and the third is to transform sorrow into song." "In that spirit," Rabbi Kelman said, "Take it upon yourself to tell one Debbie story or sing one song or study one text that she taught you every day, for the next thirty days." I have taken up this practice. And as I sing and cry, or tell a story and laugh, I find my thoughts returning to Gabby Giffords, to the intertwining of the public and the private, the promise of Debbie's teachings and the longing for Gabby's civic ideal.

One morning I thought of Debbie's song, paraphrased from the psalm we just read, "Oh God, I stand before you and I ask for strength and for courage as I take time to look at myself and I open my lips in prayer." I think of Gabby standing with strength and courage. Although bricks were thrown through her office door during the healthcare debate, still she stood strongly with her constituents who needed healthcare. A protester sporting a gun was removed from one of her earlier "Congress on the Corner" events, yet, courageously, still she scheduled them. Like Moses, who sees the bush burning and does not step away, who is aware of how difficult the task, but leads nonetheless, Gabby knew what needed to be done in her community. She stood strongly and with conviction, courageously, sometimes seeking solace and determination in her congregation, and sometimes opening her lips in prayer.

It is this phrase, “as I open my lips in prayer, ” that I studied at a liturgy retreat with Debbie in the mountains above Palm Springs many years ago. There are so many ways in which we can open up our lips. We can speak in measured tones or we can rage. We can sing or we can cry out. We can pray or we can spew forth venom. In the aftermath of the Tucson rampage, accusations and counteraccusations about provocative and vitriolic language consumed us. Did incendiary broadcasts or inflammatory websites pave the way to this tragedy? What words or symbols influenced the shooter? Whether or not they believed specific words and symbols had consequences in this instance, politicians and pundits alike instinctively recognized that the rhetoric had to be dialed down. Civic society had to recover some civility.

Singing a song of Debbie’s or sharing a story of her spiritual teaching each day has caused me to ask, “Which words do I want to open up my lips to offer?” How can we take the megaphone away from those whose incendiary speech makes me want to yell louder to drown them out? How can I, like Gabby, stand by my convictions, and still open my lips in prayer? In civil talk?

In the well-known Cherokee story, a boy tells his grandfather, "Often I feel as if two wolves are living inside me, one is good and does no harm. He lives in harmony with all around him and does not take offense when no offense was intended. He will only fight when it is right to do so, and in the right way. But...the other wolf... ah! The littlest thing will send him into a fit of temper. He fights everyone, all of the time, for no reason. He cannot think because his pain and his fear are so very great.

"Sometimes it is hard to live with these two wolves inside me, for both of them try to dominate my spirit and are always struggling against each other."

With tears streaming down his face the young boy looked intently into his Grandfather's eyes and he asked, "Which one will win Grandfather?"

Grandfather smiled and quietly said, "The one you choose to feed."

Which wolf will I feed? The one who believes in inclusive civic dialogue, in a dream of community well-being, or the one that is ready to write off the enraged staunch individualists who tear down any good government does? How can we open our lips in a way that keeps faith with the values that Gabby Giffords upholds and the respect with which she approached her constituents, even when they were her critics?

Another morning Debbie’s song, based on the Rabbi Hillel’s *Pirke Avot* text played in my head, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me, but if I am only for myself, what am I, and if not now, when.” Just as Gabby is now the strongest fighter in a team of extraordinary healers and supporters stretching the length and breadth of the country, her determination inspires all of us. Yet, we all hope, her willingness to do the arduous work of recovery is importantly, but not solely because we earnestly want her to be whole again; it is also because she is a beacon for us—because we affirm the purpose that has infused her life. We want so much for her to be able to return to Congress, to do the work she was elected to do,

and more. Yet, if we are to honor the moment when our complacency was shattered, if we are to truly contribute to Representative Gabrielle Giffords’s healing and return to strength, in whatever way we, far from her rehabilitation facility, can, it is by heeding the civic call that “Congress on the Corner” represents. It is to do our own civic duty—to insist on civility in our public discourse. It is to be activists for keeping guns out of the hands of the unstable and the deranged and to restrict those guns whose purpose seems only to wreak wanton destruction. It is to improve access to good mental health care. It is to make sure that the legislation enabling access to decent health care is not in jeopardy. Until Gabby can raise her own voice on their behalf, we who are opening our lips in prayer this morning must do so for her. And when she can, again, speak on behalf of those in need, we must join with her to create a robust chorus.

This morning, the song of Debbie’s that I found myself singing, based on Talmud Sanhedrin, is dedicated to those devoted doctors, friends, colleagues, family, physical therapists and healers spurring on Gabby’s recovery. Here are the lyrics to “Save a Life”.

Broken hearts, shattered visions

Pieced together, one by one.

Hurt another and the world’s destroyed

But save a life and you will save the world.

No more darkness, no more hiding.

No more crying, no more lies.

Looking for the way back home again.

Save a life and you will save the world.

In the garden, voices singing.

Wipe your eyes now, no more fears.

Take my hand, we’ll build the world together.

Save a life and you will save the world.

Morning comes, a new day has begun.

See the light and come to greet the day.

The voices of angels sing.

Words of comfort whispering

Save a life and you will save the world.

May we here this morning, join hands to build the world together. Save a life and we will save the world.

May you rest in peace, my dear friend, Debbie.

And we wish you, Gabby, *refuah shelemah*, the renewal of body, the renewal of spirit.

And let us say, Amen