

Chords of Reform

A new film chronicles Debbie Friedman's 30-year career as a troubador of progressive Judaism in North America

Gabriella Elias-Bachrach

SHE IS OFTEN REFERRED TO as the Shlomo Carlebach of the Reform movement, but Debbie Friedman makes music that sounds more like what you might have if Joan Baez had selected Bible verses than it does the earthy Jewish spirituals of the late "singing rabbi." She has packed Carnegie Hall and her music has been sung on TV by the purple dinosaur Barney. Friedman has even inspired a line of Hallmark cards, which combine her lyrics with greetings for Jewish holidays.

The diminutive Friedman, 53, has been using the chords of her guitar and her dynamic voice to make Hebrew liturgy and her own original lyrics understandable and palatable for American Jews since she began doing song-leading for her Reform synagogue's youth group in St. Paul in 1968. Four years after that, she recorded her first album, and since then has released another 19; together, her records and discs have sold over 200,000 copies over the years. Now the Jewish troubador is the subject of a documentary film, "A Journey of Spirit," made by her childhood friend Ann Coppel.

The 75-minute film, although highly admiring of its subject, makes it clear that there was a time when Debbie Friedman's music was the subject of significant controversy, having been both hailed as the breath of fresh air that would revive the liturgy of the Reform movement, and attacked as the death knell of traditional Jewish music, with all its nuances and complexities. Even today, she has her critics, such as Cantor Eliyahu Schleifer, at the movement's Jerusalem seminary, who says that her music "makes the synagogue a haven of touch-feely sentimentalism." But not long ago, as Coppel's film reveals, there were those who went even further, saying that Friedman's melodies were breaking the link between American Judaism and hundreds of years of tradition. Friedman, for her part, says she's not against tradition, but that if Judaism doesn't adopt music that can speak to a larger audience, "there ain't gonna be no one to carry on traditional modes."

Today, 33 years after the debut of "Sing Unto God," a compilation of Shabbat songs, many Friedman numbers, such as

her "Mi Sheberakh" prayer for healing, "Lekhi Lakh" and "Not by Might — Not by Power," have become standards, sung at summer camps and in weekly services. Cantor Alane Katzew, the director of music programming at the Union for Reform Judaism, in New York, says that "in a few years, Debbie's songs will be so embedded in the culture that they will be attributed to an anonymous author." But Friedman and her supporters had to fight hard for that acceptance.

The debate that surrounds the plain-speaking Friedman is the central conflict driving Coppel's movie, which had a screening in December in Jerusalem, at the Cinematheque's sixth annual Jewish Film Festival. The Seattle-based Coppel, who also produced and largely bankrolled the film, smiles gently when she recalls how she first decided to make a film about the woman who has become her musical hero.

"When I saw Debbie again after a period of sparse contact," says Coppel, "I began to realize that what I was missing was Jewish community." Just the act of making the movie, Coppel says, was a Jewish revival, a journey of spirit in her own life.

Most of the filmmaker's career has been devoted to industrial and corporate filmmaking, although she has also done more personal projects, such as a film about elderly Jewish women in Miami Beach, which, she explains with a laugh, "let me know I could work on things not corporate." Several more unconventional projects followed, including the 1998 feature "Crocodile Tears," which Coppel describes as "a very dark film about an HIV-positive man who makes a deal with the devil — who turns out to be a high school principal from the suburbs — in order to save his life." Coppel pauses for a breath, and then adds: "And after that I did Debbie!"

Coppel and Friedman had first become friends as teenagers, at a Reform youth convention in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, but eventually fell out of touch. When they met again, shortly after Friedman's premiere appearance at Carnegie Hall in 1996, Coppel "realized that here I had this old friend who was touching all these people, and that I ought to be the one to tell her



FRIEDMAN: 'I don't care how you sing, as long as you sing!'

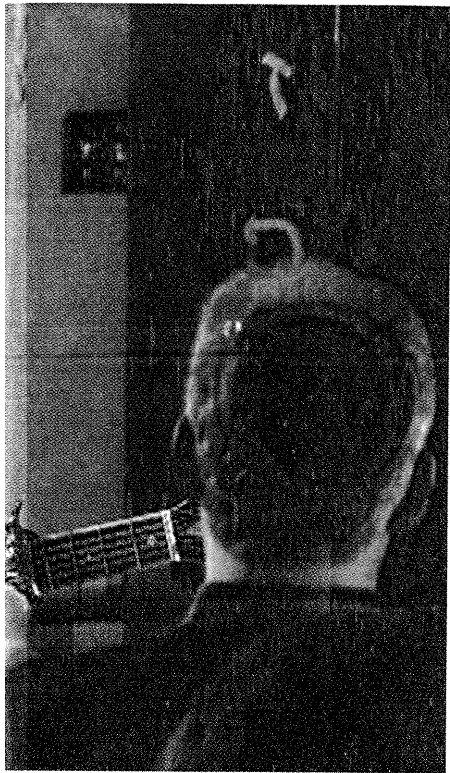
story, since I would tell it with love, with respect... with heart," she says, running her fingers over a close-cropped haircut that looks a lot like Friedman's own.

The film, which moves between Friedman's life story, scenes of her performing, and the debate that has accompanied her career among members of the cantorial community, is clearly on Friedman's side, but it makes its case gently and with humor.

Friedman recalls the formative experience of her early years as occurring when she was 5, and her father, a kosher butcher, decided to move the family from Utica, New York, to St. Paul. She felt herself being "uprooted, torn away" from the extended family who lived all around, and she credits this with her lifelong desire to create Jewish community through song. One can see this in the film, as she banters with her audiences, encouraging them to join in: "I don't care how you sing, as long as you sing!"

FRIEDMAN FIRST PICKED UP A guitar at age 16, and produced and recorded her first album in 1972, which she then sold at summer camp. A year later, she began working in Jewish education, giving occasional concerts before Jewish groups, and was eventually hired as a cantorial soloist at a Los Angeles synagogue — she could not serve as a cantor because she had not gone through the Reform movement's rigorous five-year training program.

With a strong, clear voice, and a backup



FROM A JOURNEY OF SPIRIT

Center, in White Plains, New York.

Friedman's music, argue the cantors, disregards a long history of traditional Ashkenazi melodies, and reduces the synagogue's history and meaning-laden music to the level of a campfire sing-along.

Friedman and Mendelson are shown in counterpoint, separately at first, responding indirectly to each other on the *nusah* question, and the sense is that they both know the other's side so well that the filmmaker was able to splice two monologues into a dialogue that increases in intensity as the movie progresses.

Friedman never really defends her position at length — she doesn't have to, since she is not calling for the abandonment of the role of traditional cantor — but only says, simply, powerfully and repeatedly: "First let's get them through the door of the synagogue, then we can argue about *nusah*."

Ultimately, the movie is less about the *nusah* debate than it is about Friedman's powerful pull and her success in captivating, even enchanting, her audiences. The

inspiration moves in both directions, as it is clear that Friedman can be as moved by her fans as they are by her. This is particularly evident when she describes the chronic movement disorder from which she suffers, paroxysmal dystonia, which can affect her ability to play and perform. Friedman says that when she sings the "Mi Sheberakh" prayer together with an audience, she feels as if its members are celebrating their healing effect on her without even knowing it.

"She's found her way into a majority of synagogues," noted Alane Katzew, adding that "within the Reform movement, particularly in the 35-to-65 age group, she speaks universally." In 2003 Friedman was inducted as an honorary member of the American Conference of Cantors, something Katzew suggests "expresses the embrace by Reform cantors" of her music. As if to demonstrate this acceptance, the film's final scenes have Friedman learning traditional *nusah* with Cantor Mendelson, who earlier referred to himself good-naturedly as "the *nusah* policeman," while he in turn learns some of her catchy tunes.

Not all of Friedman's critics are satisfied with the reconciliation. "It's a happy, PC ending," says Israeli-born Professor

Eliyahu Schleifer, the head of Hebrew Union College's Jerusalem cantorial studies program, who seems quite happy to play the role of bulwark of the old-school Reform movement. "If you pay attention, you'll see that even in that final scene, she's not studying serious *nusah* or great *hazanut*. But then again, if you ask the students, they would tell you that I'm an old stickler," he adds, with a touch of pride.

THE HUC STUDENTS WHO GATHER in their school's small, white-tiled lunchroom a few days after the Jerusalem screening might not apply the term "stickler" to their teacher, but a majority do say they feel that Schleifer's approach is no longer adequate to allow them to connect with congregants.

"Most of us wouldn't be here if it wasn't for the emotional pull of music," says Zoe Jacobs, 24, a first-year cantorial student from London. "It's like anything else in Judaism: Just because the rabbis wrote this fabulous Talmud doesn't mean we can't keep reinterpreting it. It's the same with music."

Only Aaron Kaplan, a first-year cantorial student, displays a marked discomfort with Friedman's music. He is also the only student in the room whose shirt is tucked in, and he sports the respectable look of a young man in a 50s movie going to meet his girlfriends' parents for the first time. "Her music just doesn't speak to me," he explains.

But most of the students tend to side with Elizabeth Wood, a first-year rabbinical student from Indiana, who describes the situation before

Friedman's participatory style caught on — in which congregants listened to services rather than taking part — as being insufficient for dealing with the evolving needs of the community. "Debbie has given people the chance to express themselves through song," she says enthusiastically, and the students behind her nod.

Ultimately, however, the HUC students, who will eventually be the ones to decide on the desirable balance between the summer-camp and "high church" styles, tend to take the same compromising, middle-of-the-road approach suggested by the movie. "Listening to only Debbie would be like eating ice cream all the time," says Zoe Jacobs. "I really like ice cream, but you need fruit and veggies in your diet too." ●

ESTEBAN ALTERMAN



COPPEL: 'I realized that what I lacked was Jewish community'