

The pain and sorrow that all of us feel at this moment of tragic loss is immense. I ask myself -- how can it be that Debbie – who was so vital, so giving, so talented, so inspiring, so radiant -- is dead? My mind and my soul cannot yet grasp that fact. I still see her, with tears in her eyes, in San Diego at the Biennial of the Union for Reform Judaism several years ago, as she sat because of her illness – after walking haltingly accompanied by her friend and mentor Jerry Kaye out onto the stage of the giant auditorium that was our Bet Keneset -- while 6000 people, led by Danny Frelander, sang, in one voice, to her, before she could sing to them, the words of the *Mishebeirach* she had composed and which has comforted hundreds of thousands, if not millions of us. And I see those tears in her eyes as she was moved by this act of blessing and *hesed* which the thousands who loved her had offered her. And I see her standing, wiping away her tears, and with the enthusiasm, energy, light and warmth that was Debbie, lifting her voice in song to the crowd as she embraced and loved and inspired them as she sang to and with them with her own beautiful voice and the fullness of her incomparable *neshamah*. And I see Debbie on the stage of Bovard Auditorium at USC as she led a song session at CAJE and summoned up her friend Elliot Dorff, and, in a characteristically Debbie act of generosity and inclusion, and impishness, had our *moreh derekh*, our teacher and guide, Elliot, sing with her to the delight of the audience. And I see Debbie at our seder table, surrounded by Deborah Lipstadt and Bonnie Tisch, and allowing my son Rafi to accompany her on his guitar, lead us in Miriam's song in our home as we celebrated the Passover together. And I see her singing at the wedding of the daughter of our friends Sandy and Claire and making a moment of joy and celebration immeasurably richer and more holy. And I see her at a concert at Valley Beth Shalom on

a Sunday afternoon after the great earthquake of 1994 teaching my children and hundreds of others the alef-bet with the radiance of God, of the Shechinah, shining out from her being. And I see the joy in her soul and the tears streaming from her eyes when I invited her to join the faculty of the Hebrew Union College so that she could share her talents and her wisdom, her very being, with our students. And I, like all of you, see her in a thousand other settings and places that bring a smile to my soul. I cannot nor would not recount them all.

Yet, I also see Debbie in the hospital at St. Luke's in New York two years ago and think of the pain and hurt she carried and suffered in both her body and her soul. Debbie was able to pray for *refuat hanefesh u'refuat haguf* – the healing of body and soul – and reach out and comfort us through her music because she had a unique ability to allow the sorrow and the love that resided in the deepest recesses of her soul find expression in her song. The fears and insecurity of her soul, and the depth and beauty that marked it, were real, and are best captured in her own words, in an e-mail Debbie wrote to her friend Alice Shalvi in Jerusalem just this past November about the Rosh Chodesh group to which they and a number of their women friends belonged. I thank Alice, Letty Cottin Pogrebin, and Rabbi Joy Levitt for sharing it with me. I would now let Debbie herself, in her own words, describe herself – in all her complexity and vulnerability -- most aptly to us, for it will give us a rare glimpse into the depths and uncertainties of her own being. In what I now feel is an eerily prescient premonition, Debbie wrote to Alice:

I hardly ever made it to the Rosh Chodesh group, Most of
the time it was because I was out of the city and sometimes

it was because I was too frightened to be amongst so many people. Given who I am and what I do, one would think that would not be the case.

These few comments about my fears, though self indulgent, are relevant to what I think to be the subject of one's own death. I think we are frightened of our own death for a few reasons.

First of all, we wonder if we have given anything to the world, [have we given] enough that we will be remembered? Then, we are terrified [that] we are going to be forgotten? That we will have lived and worked hard to make a difference in the world and it will all have been for nothing because it is forgotten and we are forgotten. That, in fact, we are nothing more than dust and ashes.

Another reason is because death is an unknown...and I like to plan my day for the most part. I like to know what is waiting for me. I don't mind a bit of spontaneity, but I would prefer to know more about Olam Haba.

But I think the thing I fear most about death is my fear of

life. I haven't yet mastered the art of living. How can I leave this world when I haven't yet learned to live in it and manage it? If I don't know how to live with openness and without fear, how will I ever be able to look at death's face when we meet? How can I possibly be gracious? It would seem that before I die I must learn to live life without fear. I must learn to live with *chein* and *chesed* and a loving and open heart. Once I accept this, embrace the beauty of this world, both life, and the way in which I see death will be transformed.

This is not an intellectual exercise that can be remedied by a passage from text. The answers will come from the text of our experience. This is clearly a matter of the soul with which we [all] must struggle.

To you, my friend, Debbie, and to all of us, I can only say that your life was one of such *chein* and *hesed*, such grace and kindness. From the recesses of your beautiful *neshamah*, you blessed and gave to us all so often and on so many occasions with your intelligence, your caring, and your talents – even to your own detriment. This is why you would always first bless us with your *Mishebeirach*, your words and song of healing, and only afterward allow us to join you in these words of prayer and hope. You had to give first, and only then could you receive. Out of your pain and love, you displayed unparalleled empathy and concern for others, and we loved you for your embrace.

How could you, Debbie, ever think you would be forgotten or that your life would “be for nothing.” Your body, it is true, will soon be returned to the dust. But your soul will not perish, and your spirit and your voice, your being, will touch and comfort us in moments of sadness and joy forever.

Debbie, in the commentary on the morning prayer service, *Shaharit*, that you wrote with your teacher and friend, Joe Septimus, you observed, “Every soul is its own song.” But some souls are greater and purer than others, some songs more real and more true. Your soul surely was, and your songs surely are. You were and are *y’hida b-doreikh* – unique in your and our generation. There was and is no one like you. We will not forget you, and every time your words and songs are repeated and sung, we will recall your name and you will live on within us and continue to provide us with instruction and inspiration.

The hymn *Shir Hakavod*, the Song of Glory, begins with the words, “*Anim zemirot v’shirim erog, kee ailechah nafshi ta’a’rog* -- I will compose and weave together songs and hymns of pleasantness, because my soul yearns for You, the Holy One of Blessing.” Your life and your song was the fulfillment of those words.

T’hee nishmateikh tzerurah biztror ha-hayim – Debbie, my friend, may your soul now be bound up in the bond of eternal life with that God for Whom you yearned and for Whom you wrote such beautiful songs and melodies. Elie Wiesel once observed that God created humanity because God loves stories. You have taught us that God created us because God loves song. We will miss you.