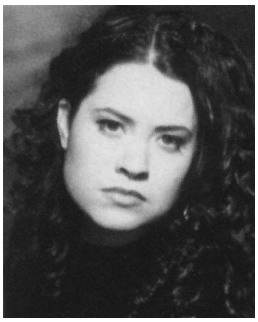
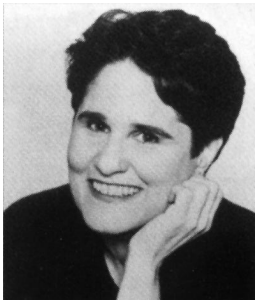
Miriam's daughters sing

• by Robert L. Cohen





"Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion," exhorts the prophet Zechariah (2:14). It is an injunction that contemporary American-Jewish women musicians, singers, composers, and songwriters are increasingly heeding.

To some extent, they are merely echoing their Biblical forebears. After Moses leads the Children of Israel in the *Shirat Hayam* (the Song of the Sea, after the Children of Israel cross the Red Sea or Sea of Reeds), his sister, Miriam, leads the women in dance—and, according to some interpretations, song—accompanied by timbrels (Exodus 15:20–21). (Some classical commentaries argue that Miriam led *all* of Israel—women *and* men.)

The Bible tells of other women singing—wedding songs, funeral wails, even battle hymns—but rabbinical prohibitions beginning in the early Christian era minimized women's public music-making—until now. In contemporary America, the "democratization," or deprofessionalization, of Jewish religious and musical life, along with the powerful rise of Jewish feminism and the appealing eclecticism of American musical models, has birthed a vigorous revival of music-making—liturgical and secular; folk, art, and popular—on the part of Miriam's daughters.

her father's daughter

If Miriam is the oft-cited historical inspiration for Jewish women's music today, the *zaide* of the Jewish musical renaissance generally, for women as for men, has unquestionably been the late Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, whose sometimes poignant, sometimes exhilarating melodies—composed in an Americanized style of Hasidic *niggunim*, or spiritual chants—are sung by Jews, of every denomination and no denomination, all over the world.

Shlomo was renowned for empowering and even ordaining women—and he

continued on next page

MIRIAM'S DAUGHTERS, FROM TOP TO BOTTOM: NESHAMA CARLEBACH, DEBBIE FRIEDMAN, ELIZABETH SWADOS, AND BASYA SCHECHTER

"My music just **happens;** *it comes from the heart."*

virtually insisted that his daughter **Neshama Carlebach** go out into the world and sing (notwithstanding rabbinical strictures that, according to some interpretations, mandate that women should sing only for other women). Neshama sang at concerts together with her father during the last five years of his life, and has since sung for audiences—Orthodox and non-Orthodox, women only and mixed, Jewish and non-Jewish—in Europe and Israel and "from California to the New York Island" in this country—including such venues as the Temple of the Universe, a meditation retreat in Florida.

She has recorded her father's melodies on NESHAMA CARLEBACH: SOUL and, *with* her father, on HANESHAMA SHEL SHLOMO (a play on the Hebrew meaning of *"neshama"*: soul); and she has since issued DANCING WITH MY SOUL, which features five renditions of Shlomo melodies—four of them never before recorded—along with seven original songs in English, many of them collaborations with her new musical partner, jazz pianist David Morgan.

Like her father, Neshama assigns a much greater role to Jewish music than that of mere entertainment. Her singing, along with the teachings and stories she shares at classes and concerts, is, she hopes, a means of inspiring her listeners to listen to, and trust, their heart—as she followed hers in singing; of giving strength to Jewish women in particular; and of conveying her own understanding of (Orthodox) Judaism as ultimately not constricting but life-giving, and joyous. She treasures a letter from a non-Jewish woman advising that at Neshama's concert (in Vienna), she "was falling in love again with the God of Israel." I am not surprised; there is an entrancing, hypnotic spirituality to Neshama's in-person singing.

On recordings, there is an earthy sensuousness to her rendition of her father's melodies—I sometimes think I'm hearing Ofra Haza meets Shlomo Carlebach. The originals on her new CD are passionate expressions of seamlessly braided, at once spiritual and (perhaps) romantic longing and loss; the title song could easily serve as the rubric for all of Neshama's singing, whether of *niggunim* or of original songs.

the high priestess of healing

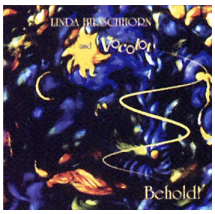
But if Shlomo Carlebach is the *zaide* of Jewish musical renewal today, **Debbie Friedman** is unquestionably the First Lady of American-Jewish song, whose lyrical settings (many of them now standards) of traditional or adapted Hebrew—and some original English—texts, recorded on some 17 albums in the last three decades, have been sung by hundreds or thousands of Jews at synagogue and healing services, adult retreats and youth camps, children's schools and Federation conventions—and at Carnegie Hall (preserved on DEBBIE FRIEDMAN AT CARNEGIE HALL).

Though Friedman's original musical influences were very much American (mostly 60s folk and pop singers) rather than Eastern European, her musical sensibility is nonetheless Hasidic in its emphasis on the spontaneous: "My music just *happens*," she avers; "it comes from the heart." (She volunteers that she can't read a note.) And her music is also Hasidic in its *accessibility*. "My

music doesn't belong to me," she insists. "They [her listeners] own it."

Friedman has a deeply spiritual sense of vocation, seeing herself as a vehicle for expressing Jewish texts, nourishing her listeners' souls, and creating community. Her own illness, brought on by a bad reaction to medication, has been her gateway to healing through music; one gets the feeling, in fact, that Friedman's open-hearted melodies are a means of pursuing her own tentative, earnest spiritual search. "I want to know why life is so sweet," she offers, "and why life is so bitter."

Miriam's slow snake dance



Sweet harmonies have been invigorating **Linda Hirschhorn's** life since she was a child—listening to recordings of union songs, Weavers songs, and early Israeli folk songs, and singing in a yeshiva choir in the second or third grade. (She subsequently sang in New York's Zamir Chorale and in the San Francisco and Oakland symphony choruses.) Now, as a singer, songwriter, and cantor, she finds getting people to sing in harmony (which she does often at adult Jewish retreats) exhilarating—and composing rounds, which she views as an easy way to *get* people singing, fun: "I always hear things in several voices."

With her Vocolot ensemble ("clear, strong, sweet voices of women singing," according to one folk music magazine), Hirschhorn has recorded enchanting new settings of traditional and adapted liturgy, a couple of dozen original settings of poet Marcia Falk's alternative and feminist liturgy, and some original songs, many inspired by Jewish feminist concerns. In "Miriam's Slow Snake Dance at the Riverside," she combines traditional words and chant with original Hebrew and English words and a new melody to create an exultant anthem.

Hirschhorn's "Circle Chant" (included on SKIES ABLAZE; a revised version is on ROOTS & WINGS) is an even more successful anthem: widely recorded; sung at demonstrations about everything from El Salvador and the homeless to nuclear weapons disposal; and included in *Singing the Living Tradition*, the hymnal of the Unitarian Universalist Association. And launched into the world, like her other compositions, on what Ronnie Gilbert, once *of* the Weavers, calls "a voice of pure honey."

music as midrash

Like Hirschhorn and Debbie Friedman, theater composer **Elizabeth Swados** was influenced by American folk music, but she wants to express rougher emotions in her "folk operas" and oratorios. That requires, for her, a musical eclecticism—incorporating aspects of gospel, rock, jazz, and blues—and something of the "emotional ambivalence" that she hears in the music of Kurt Weill, which pervaded her family home in Buffalo: a "spiritual sound" that could be bitter and ironic, and sad even when gay, in what she considers a very Jewish way.

Evoking the multiple dimensions and emotional complexity of the protagonists in her song cycle (and CD) BIBLE WOMEN meant, for Swados, making "midrashic choices" (that is, rooted in Biblical commentary and interpretation)

"I still believe music is revolution."

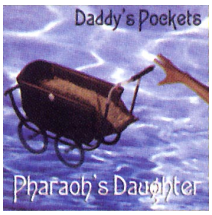
BASYA SCHECHTER AND HER GROUP, PHARAOH'S DAUGHTER

to interpret their lives and personalities—and then trying to express, in music, both what she learned from studying sources and her visceral responses *to* these characters. She sees Miriam as "the first woman rock 'n' roll singer," needing gospel music to evoke her essence; Sarah, on the other hand, was "all about irony, plus a strong faith." Her "tragic humor" could best be conveyed via a Jewish blues, in the style of Sarah Vaughan.

Swados has always had several sets of listeners: not-quite-mainstream New York City theater audiences (she's won three Obies and numerous other awards and fellowships), a teenage audience, women's audiences, and a Jewish audience. With all of them, she wants "to tell them stories and sing them songs," and she believes in *challenging* audiences: countering their "emotional laziness" by awakening unexpected emotions and reactions; rejecting the cynicism and detachment of the age. In her dramatizations of Jewish texts (*Job, Esther, The Song of Songs*, the Haggadah), which she considers "the most gratifying work of my career," she tries to impart the *values* she sees inhering in these texts: justice, generosity, learning, and humor, along with a robust emotional and spiritual faith. (Forthcoming: a new musical version of *The Golem*—"I always wanted to score a horror movie"—and, she hopes, a theatrical rendition of the entire Book of Exodus.)

Swados likens setting a text to music to "lighting it"—revealing its inner meaning—and aims for an experiential immediacy on the part of the listener: "I just crossed the Red Sea!" "I just met Miriam!" In short, nothing less than the goal of every Seder. (In Swados's family, they sang *every* song in the Haggadah.) "I still believe music is revolution," Swados says—and merging the past and the present in music she identifies as perhaps her foremost musical challenge.

the rebel from Borough Park



A different sort of fusion is evident in the work of singer, songwriter, and instrumentalist **Basya Schechter**, a child of Borough Park, Brooklyn, Orthodoxy (with a Syrian step-family) but a self-described "rebel from birth," whose Pharaoh's Daughter band presents, she says, "a blend of what I am": guitar-based Orthodox folk music with a Syrian flavor—or, says Schechter, "a very Ashkenazi take on Sephardic music"—embellished by Middle Eastern rhythms and world music instrumentation. Schechter herself plays guitar, oud—a short-necked, fretless Middle Eastern lute—and various exotic percussion instruments.

A typical Pharaoh's Daughter concert (like the group's new CD, OUT OF THE REEDS) may include a Yiddish song—maybe one learned from her father, with whom she remembers singing as they walked to synagogue on Saturday mornings—that sounds Turkish, an original English composition that sounds more exotic than any of the ostensibly Jewish pieces, a setting of a Biblical verse that tries to convey "what Pharaoh's daughters might have sounded like as Egyptian women," a traditional Ladino song dressed up with an original introduction, and a variety of world music riffs on Biblical and even Talmudic texts, rendered in several inflections of Hebrew. ("Even our pronunciation of Hebrew is eclectic," she cheerfully owns.) The overall experience of exuberant inconsistency suggests something like a late-night, multicultural Jewish prayer jam: passionate, even urgent, yet tightly controlled; embracing some of the repetitive ecstasy of a *niggun* and inspiring an inner, sinuous soul dance in a corner of the aisle (visible at several recent concerts) or in one's seat.

In the Bible, it was Pharaoh's daughter who pulled infant Moses out of the water; in the midrash, she is given the name Bithiah—meaning, like Basya, "daughter of God." This Basya is, then, both a self-styled daughter of Pharaoh and a singing daughter of Miriam—perhaps the ultimate fusion artist?

Robert L. Cohen is a freelance editor and writer who lectures widely on Jewish music. He has written for National Public Radio, for Moment *and* Hadassah *magazines, and for* New York Newsday *and a minyan's worth of Jewish newspapers.*