

High Holy Days Message from Cantor Daniela Gesundheit

A Mark with Meaning

To the members, friends, and families of our Shir Libeynu community,

I grew up on demolition sites. I would watch charmed, fading wooden houses buckle and collapse onto their broken foundations the same way carved pumpkins finally surrender by mid-November. Shingles bleached gray from the sun, uneven shutters, bougainvillea trailing the perimeter walls, cold brown floor tiles, the storied scents of pantry and fireplace pervading the interiors — all of these details, and still, the process was faster than you would think. The demolitions were, as Melville described in *Moby Dick*, "a speechlessly quick chaotic bundling of a man into Eternity."

Holding my father's hand, we would tour homes that were slated to be leveled and then built up again to the owner's dream specifications. Restless, I would wriggle from his grip to go sing loudly in the skylighted corridors, explore the bathrooms, trek through the overgrown yards— *were there any other children here? A boy? A pool?!*

One of his clients invited us and all of the children in their family to finger-paint the walls and floors of their home before they demolished it. While the other children seemed to really revel in it— their hands dipped to their elbows in cold blue paint— I felt self-conscious. I wanted to make a mark with meaning. I knew demolition was imminent — I could imagine precisely what the rafters and beams would look like crushed under the weight of the roof and how the floor tiles would instantly transpose into an illegible mosaic. But I also understood that erasure was not total, that what comes before demolition persists and matters.

Demolition is, at its core, revisionism. I come from a revisionist family, a revisionist people. My father is a Mexican-born architect, my mother a visual artist and third generation Angeleno — they both razed the mess of reality and offered something deliberate in its stead. My paternal grandparents fled genocide brought upon them because of their Jewishness, while my maternal grandparents fled their Jewishness in response to that same genocide. Both sides of my family were tasked with hastily packing a suitcase with whatever beloved objects or shards of culture they could grab. They did not set out with the tailwind of an intact ancestry; it was in ruins behind them. So we made up our Judaism as we went. On my father's side we feasted on blintzes alongside chilaquiles, and we spoke Yiddish with a Mexican accent. I went to a Jewish day school, but we did not consider ourselves religious.

And yet, something of significance grew from that scrap of identity. I could not shake the ancient melodies and texts of our tradition; the songs and prayers displayed a bravado and brokenness all at once, as though the songs themselves were stunned that they had survived so long, through such prolonged persecution. I wanted to walk into these songs, turn some lights on inside them, hear what they sounded like in a capable and authentic female voice. In Jewish orthodoxy, women are forbidden from singing in front

of men, so my first carving into the staid form of my tradition was simply opening my mouth and singing.

I consult tradition when I am at a loss; It provides an antidote to the constant content update or disappointment of the news cycle. Judaism provides communal gestures of forgiveness. There are many opportunities to, as poet Alan Felsenthal describes, “restore dignity to experience through music...” Social accountability keeps our revisions honest and anchored to ancestry, even as we are carried by the swift currents of our modern experience. I look squarely at my tradition, chisel in hand, to reconstruct a patriarchal lineage to make room for female and non-binary bodies, spirits, intellects, and voices, so to better make the poetry of Judaism translatable to myself and my peers.

We can re-work, but we cannot obliterate. Matter just does not behave that way. So, if we are stuck with ourselves, our planet, our culture, our *matter*, for the long haul, how do we endure the discomfort of demolition and the long pause before a rebuild? We know what we have destroyed, but we don't yet know what we will create.

In Judaism, there is the presumption of imperfection as well as the ability to try again. The High Holiday liturgy is a series of prayers and songs that demarcate and emphasize the contours of this trying. The moments where we have missed the mark become part of our fabric of disappointments and triumphs. To demolish and re-build without reflection or vision is to write a story only in the hollow language of grief and greed. We must commit to gestures that have meaning and purpose.

Shana Tova U'Metukah,

Daniela