

And now for something completely different:

HEEBONICS

Shir Libeynu cantor doubles as folk band's singer-songwriter

By RITA POLIAKOV
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To Daniela Gesundheit, a singer, songwriter and cantor, music can be terrifying.

"I like to choose something that scares me," she told *Heebonics* at a dimly lit café in the heart of Toronto's Kensington Market.

Contemplating her repertoire, Gesundheit looked intently into the green tea concoction in front of her.

"Have you ever tried something new?" she asked, taking a sip from her oversized mug.

"For me, it's constantly terrifying. I get to a level, I play the song perfectly, I record a record with that song, and at the end, I have to start over again, write a new song.

"I think, being honest with ourselves, there's no such thing as true mastery. The more you look into something, the more you feel baffled by it. If you finally understand something, there's no reason to live," she said, shrugging.

"Well, I guess you can teach it, but then you'd be new at teaching."

Gesundheit, the founder and lead singer of the folk band Snowblink with bandmate Dan Goldman, grew up in Los Angeles, moved to San Francisco and then moved to Toronto this past summer.

Apart from performing, the 26-year-old is the cantor at Congregation Shir Libeynu, an unaffiliated liberal shul in downtown Toronto.

"I have enormous amounts to learn about Judaism. Every time I go to study it, I feel I really know nothing," she said.

For Gesundheit, Shir Libeynu ("song of our hearts" in Hebrew), which holds services that include ancient and modern prayers and music, is a good fit.

"It's a strange experience to be a new cantor in a congregation and a leader. It's challenging, but [the community] is being very supportive. It's a community that wants to take responsibility for their own Judaism.

"They're not going to shul because they think they have to, they really want to be involved, they want to be moved... and music is a huge focus, that resonated," she said.

"The way I found to communicate with the world is through singing. All the prayers are set to... really beautiful music."



Singer, songwriter and cantor Daniela Gesundheit says she is motivated by fear.

Gesundheit connected to music at a young age. As a child, she would sing sentences rather than say them.

"I went to a Jewish day school and went to synagogue. I always sang. Jewish music was the first music that I learned," she said, pausing to glance at a paper lantern hanging from the ceiling above her.

She continued, saying, "I guess I started writing songs when I was 14."

At that time, her older brother died in a car accident, and then three years later, tragedy struck her again when her first boyfriend died of a brain aneurysm. This caused Gesundheit to step away from religion.

"There was a gap... After my boyfriend passed away, I was just angry about religion. I felt I had to do my own inquiries. I don't know when it turned around, it was just a matter of time passing," she said.

"Halfway through my university career, I got re-interested in Judaism. I got back into studying text and music."

While Gesundheit began to reconnect with her religion, something at shul still bothered her.

"I always found myself attending services and being distracted by the fact that [I thought] 'I can do this better. I can think of so many ways I can make this more meaningful,'" she said.

About a year ago, Gesundheit plunged into her first job as a cantor at a synagogue in Mammoth Lakes, Calif.

"I heard they needed a cantor, I jumped in. I think being a prayer leader was pretty terrifying... My voice had to represent [the congregation's] voice. It all went well, it felt right to be there."

While Gesundheit plans to continue working with synagogues, she also finds time to focus on her music, which she said is influenced by Dolly Parton and Enya, among others.

For Gesundheit, who plays electric guitar, the lyrics in her songs are as important as the melody.

"I'm very concerned with words in music.

Choosing the right words is vital. Usually, there's just a lot of time with the dictionary. When writing lyrics, I look up words that I know the meaning to," she said, adding that images are important, as well.

"For me, images are really tangible."

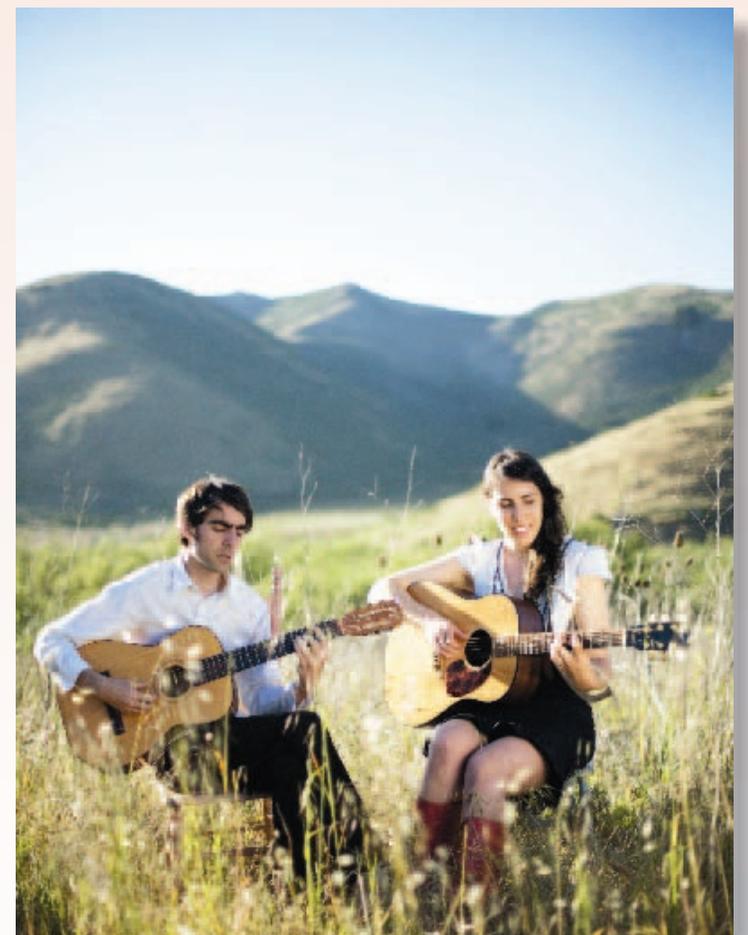
After a pause, she continued, saying, "I've had this problem before. I was finishing a record, and I was trying to say, 'I want this to sound like the paws of a bunny rabbit.'" Another pause.

"I guess you'd think if I were to touch a bunny, it gives me a sensation. Anything you do produces a sensation in your body. [I] should be able to create art that can translate that."

While Gesundheit doesn't write obviously religious lyrics, her spirituality and music often intersects.

"[My music] can easily be compared to prayer. In practice, they're still two separate things. I don't play Snowblink in the synagogue. [But] they totally inform each other, Hebrew phrases will show up in songs," she said.

For more about Shir Libeynu and Snowblink, visit www.shirlibeynu.ca and www.snowblink.org.



Dan Goldman, left, is Gesundheit's bandmate in her folk band Snowblink.