
One-Woman Show Demonstrates the Power of Forgiveness and Random Acts of Connection

Actress and educator Barbara Heller's show "Messianic Moments and Cosmic Conversations" will have audiences questioning their own judgements and asking themselves how they could forgive the seemingly unforgivable.



Brian Fishbach

September 20, 2023





(Photo credit Barbara Heller)

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It makes sense that actress and educator Barbara Heller has put together a one-woman show where she plays several characters experiencing heart-opening moments. The performers she grew up admiring most were known for their impressions: Jim Henson, Carol Burnett, Tracy Ullman, Dana Carvey. Her favorite musicians — the Indigo Girls, James Taylor and Amy Grant — all are known for their kind and gentle personalities and musical affect.

Heller's stage show, "Messianic Moments and Cosmic Conversations," is about forgiveness and context. Heller plays eight distinct characters between the ages of 18 and 88, each having a five minute conversation that leads to a breakthrough.

Each scene deals with Judaism in some capacity. And it's no accident that there the number eight shows up in the dialogue of each scene — in Judaism, the number eight signifies new beginnings. Each character Heller portrays is struggling to either accept themselves or someone else in their life who really hurt them. Even though each scene begins as just a slice of life, each character is struggling for a way to move forward.

It will leave audiences asking themselves if they could forgive one particular thing that happened in their life. The dialogue isn't just platitudes. The conversations feel real, and the digital backdrop at the back of the stage makes the show a much more immersive experience.

“It's not one soundbite, not one line [of dialogue] that you'd read on Twitter but an actual five minutes of ‘I'm going to open my heart and listen fully and I'm going to share fully,’” Heller told the Journal. “And when we do that, we might actually find that we're all complicated.”

The themes of the show are quite relevant for the High Holy Days.

“You're living your life in a nuanced context,” Heller said. “If you're living your life as a Jewish person, then you realize that there's always room for *Teshuvah* (repentance). There's always room for, ‘I got to fix that’ instead of, ‘oh, I made such a mistake’ or ‘that's it, I won't be invited back’ or ‘Oh, I'll never be able to talk to my mom (or my son) again.’ We can't do that. No one will win if we live on that level.”

Heller hopes that audiences of “Messianic Moments” do not have those fears anymore.

Her presence and use of physical comedy is entertaining and convincing. With one person playing eight people, it’s easy for the audience to become confused. But not for Heller. Every character she plays, with their body language, accent, and mannerisms is distinct and memorable in each respective scene.

Context, conversation and forgiveness are also the primary themes on Heller’s podcast, “See One Beautiful Soul.” Several of the episodes directly influenced scenes on stage in “Messianic Moments.” Heller discussed one of these episodes and more with the Journal. (The conversation has been edited for space and clarity.)

JJ: What’s one the most profound examples of forgiveness you’ve had on your podcast?

BH: So I had Azim Khamisa who forgave Tony Hicks, the 14 year-old murderer of his son Tariq, who was 20 at the time. [Hicks] wanted so badly to finally have a family or be connected in a gang that with one shot, he killed Tariq for delivering a pizza.. Azim decided to forgive the murderer of his son. And after 16 years [Azim] fought the judge and said, “please let him out on parole.” He became very close to Hicks and he offered him a job, and now they speak together about youth violence. Not only did he forgive him, he offered him a job and he works with him. And they have saved over 150,000 lives. They have 150,000-plus

letters from teenagers from all over the world who they have seen them speak. They have Ted Talks and they each carry one of those letters that say “I was going to commit suicide today,” “I was going to commit murder today,” “I was going to join a gang today,” “I was going to blow up my school today,” “but I heard you speak, and I’ve completely made a 180 in my life.” All of these letters are insane.

JJ: Is there a specific audience you’re trying to connect with as you wrote and perform the show?

BH: Every human I know. I just had a meeting with this big Broadway producer, and he’s like, well, what’s your demographic? I’m like, “well, I guess it’s mostly Jews.” But honestly, it’s really anyone who is struggling right now to find their mental wellness, people who are sitting at home really freaked out and anxious. That’s who I want to talk to. And I think that’s pretty much everybody, but it could be anyone.

JJ: Do you think the following statement is true? “The fate of all true geniuses is being misunderstood.”

BH: That’s a great question. I don’t consider myself a genius, and I guess you’d have to ask one. I’m definitely an idealist. And I think Walt Disney, Fred Rogers, Jim Henson, Jim Carrey, Deepak Chopra — these are people that I like to follow and read their work and listen to them. I think that they probably are misunderstood and don’t get a lot of sleep. But I think what’s beautiful about them and why so many of those names make your heart go, “Oh, I

like those people,” is because there’s a part of all of us that has that ... Meanwhile, this week, I had a couple of people who went to see the show, say, “I had a few conversations in the grocery store this week. It’s working.” And I’m like, oh my God, this is amazing!

JJ: Why do you think some people feel so threatened by new ideas?

BH: We are so inundated with what “this person, I follow what Bill Maher says, what Joe Rogan says, what Oprah said, I have to filter everything through that person instead of myself.” Especially this new generation. It’s all the branding and the, “well, who do you follow?” Here’s the thing: a lot of people in the 1980s and 1990s have come down really hard on organized religion. And yet my plea on the podcast and also through “Messianic Moments” is find a religion and a community that works for you. Because here’s the problem: We are meaning-making machines. If we do not have a community, we will find one and it’ll find us because we need it. We cannot be alone. We want belonging so badly.

“We are meaning-making machines. If we do not have a community, we will find one and it’ll find us because we need it. We cannot be alone. We want belonging so badly.”

JJ: What's something that we can do today to embody the lessons from "Messianic Moments?"

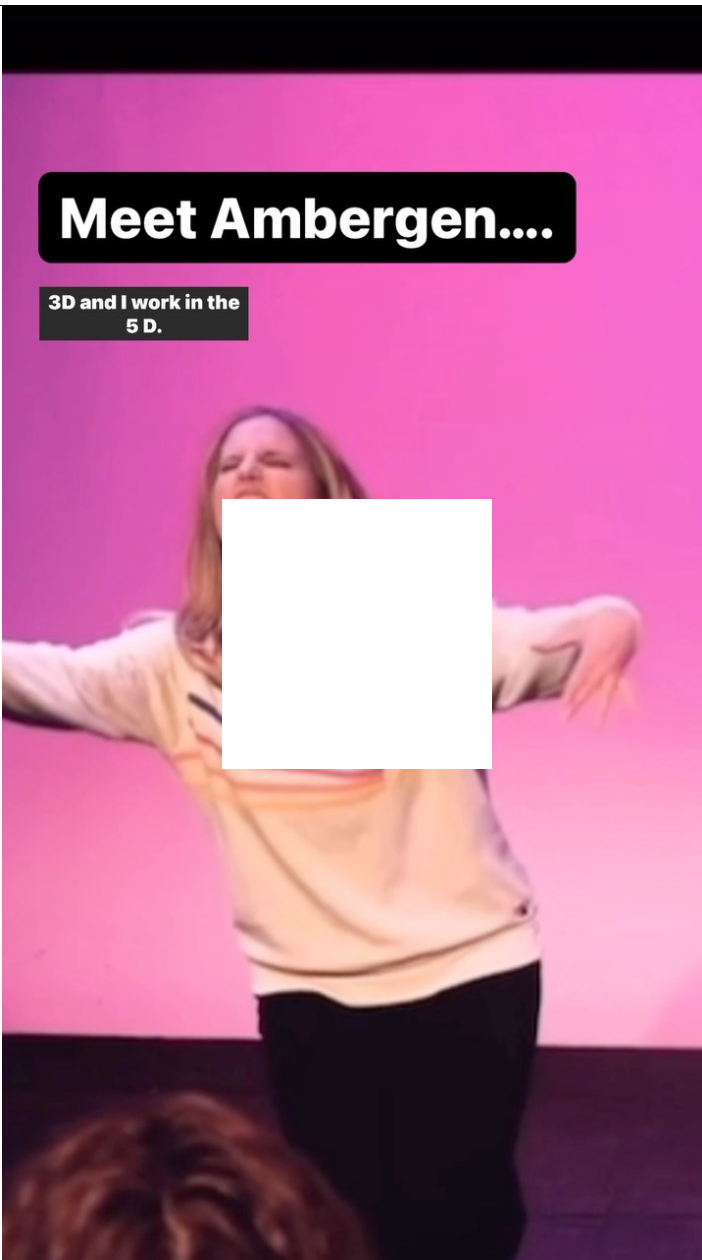
BH: I'm going to challenge you to see if you can make one new friend today in your apartment building.

"Messianic Moments and Cosmic Conversations" will be performed at The Studio Stage in Hollywood on Thursday, September 21st and at the United Solo Fest in New York on Sunday, October 15. For tickets, go to <https://www.barbheller.com/soloshow>



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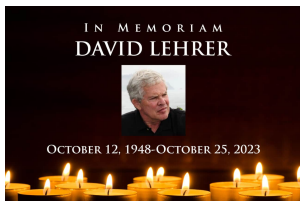


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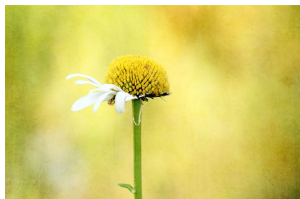
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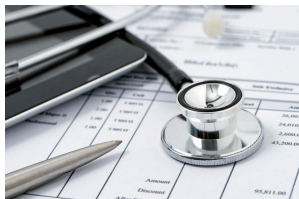
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October 26, 2023

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October 26, 2023

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