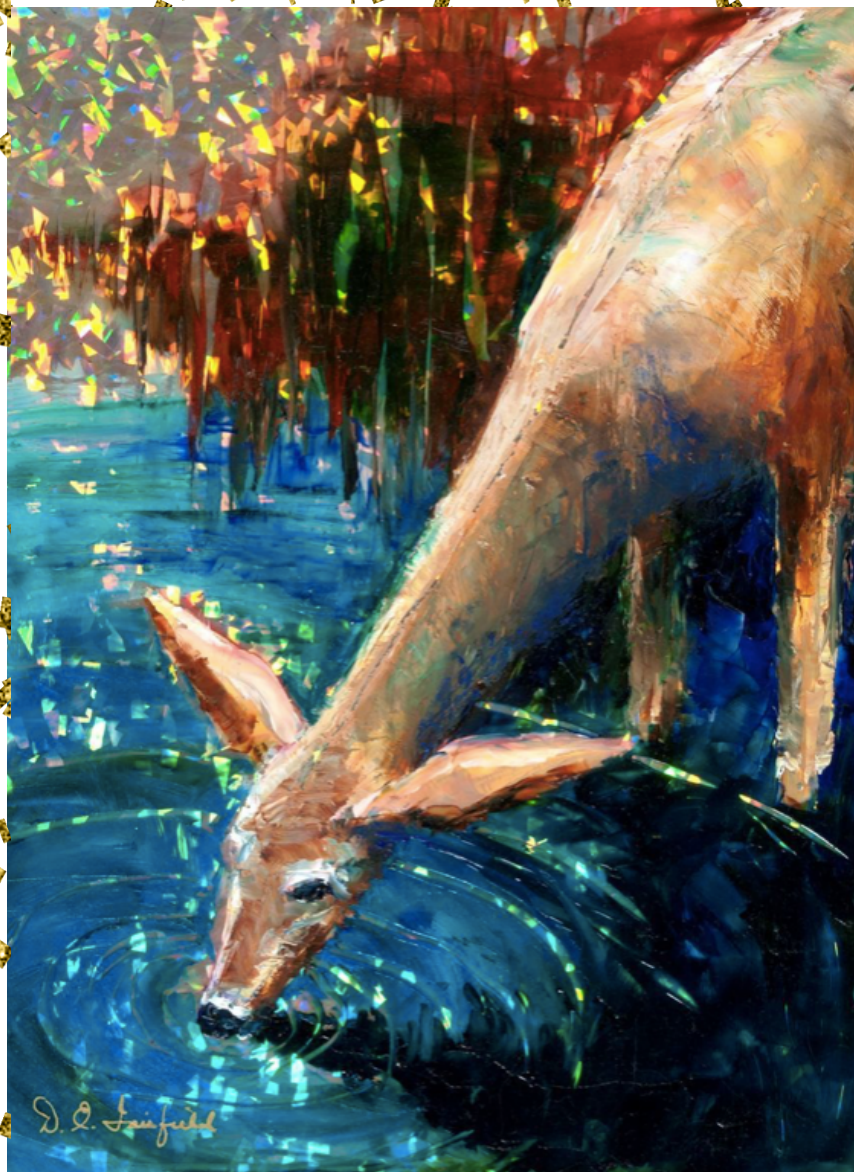


Musical Expressions of Psalms of Longing

A Recital by

Lara Tessler



December 5th, 2023 / 22nd of Kislev 5784
Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion

Introduction

This project has truly been a labor of love through a lifetime of exploration. In many moments of my life I have turned to music as an outlet of self expression. Many of these texts in particular have ebbed and flowed with me through times of joy and celebration as well as times of struggle and loneliness. The authors of these psalms turned to written poetry as a form of expression and comfort, and I myself have looked to these particular texts for the very same reasons. This recital is both a presentation of my own favorite settings of these psalms, and an exploration of how these texts can be brought to life through music and song.

Each of these psalms expresses a deep yearning for a connection to the divine. This longing for a relationship to God in these texts are displayed in a variety of ways:

- Psalms 63 and 42 feature metaphors which relate the basic need for water to a similar need for God. The use of the metaphor links these two texts to one another. Their language allows for anyone who has ever experienced thirst to understand what a thirst for God might also mean.*
- Psalms 130 and 61 call out to the divine from faraway places. Whether it be from the depths, or the ends of the Earth, these two texts reach out to God from a sense of displacement and isolation. Even at a vast distance, either physically or emotionally, these psalms call for God to come near and to bring comfort and a sense of company.*
- Psalms 121 and 13 are both forms of call and response. Each psalm presents a question and then provides an answer to that dilemma. The texts present both a real questioning of God's presence, and then immediately proceed to give a reassuring answer. How can we maintain a connection to the divine? By holding fast to our faith.*

Translations of Psalms by Lara Tessler with the guidance of Dr. Adriane Leveen

Psalm 63	צְמָאָה לִּי נַפְשִׁי	Chabad
Psalm 42	צְמָאָה נַפְשִׁי	Joey Weisenberg
Psalm 121	אֵשׁ אֵינִי	Ben Steinberg
Psalm 130	מִמַּעַמְקִים	Shirona
Psalm 13	עַד-אָנָּה	Miqedem
Psalm 61	Psalm 61	Cantor Becky Mann
	Where Might I Go to Find You	Cantor Ellen Dreskin & Dan Nichols

Featuring: Cantor Josh Breitzer, Elana Arian, Ivan Barenboim, Sierra Fox
Kevin McKenzie, Lauren Roth & Cantor Becky Mann

Psalm 63 - צְמָאָה לַיהוָה נַפְשִׁי - Chabad

צְמָאָה לַיהוָה נַפְשִׁי כְּמָה לַיהוָה בְּשָׂרִי בְּאַרְצ־צִיָּה וְעֵינִי בְּלִי־מַיִם
כִּן בִּקְדָּשׁ חֲזִיתָהּ לְרֹאוֹת עֵזָה וּכְבוֹדָהּ

“My soul thirsts for you, my flesh yearns for you as a dry land weary without water.
Thus I shall behold you in the sanctuary and see your strength and glory.”

1 A psalm of David, when he was in the wilderness of Judah 2 God, You are my God. I search for you. My soul thirsts for you, my flesh yearns for you as a dry land weary without water 3 Thus I shall behold you in the sanctuary and see your strength and glory 4 Truly, your kindness is better than life, my lips praise you. 5 Thus I bless you in my life, I lift up my hands invoking your name. 6 As like with suet and fat my soul is sated. I sing praises with joyful lips. 7 When I remember You on my bed, in the night-watch I murmur about you. 8 For you are my help, and in the shadow of your wings I shout for joy. 9 My soul clings to you, your right hand supports me. 10 May those who seek to ravage my soul, enter the depths of the earth 11 May they be split by the sword, may they be to prey to the jackals 12 And the King shall rejoice in God, all who swear an oath by him will praise when the mouths of liars are stopped up.	מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד בְּהִיּוֹתוֹ בְּמִדְבַּר יְהוּדָה: אֱלֹהִים אֵלֵי אַתָּה אֲשַׁחֲרֶךָ צְמָאָה לַיהוָה נַפְשִׁי כְּמָה לַיהוָה בְּשָׂרִי בְּאַרְצ־צִיָּה וְעֵינִי בְּלִי־מַיִם: כִּן בִּקְדָּשׁ חֲזִיתָהּ לְרֹאוֹת עֵזָה וּכְבוֹדָהּ: כִּי־טוֹב חֶסֶדְךָ מִחַיִּים שְׁפָתִי יִשְׂבַּח וְיִגְדֹּל: כִּן אֲבָרְכֶךָ בְּחַיֵּי בְשָׁמְךָ אֲשָׂא כָפִי: כְּמוֹ חֵלֶב וְדָשֵׁן תִּשְׂבַּע נַפְשִׁי וְשִׁפְתֵי רִנָּנוֹת יְהִלְלֶנּוּ: אִם־זִכְרָתֶךָ עַל־יְצוּעֵי בְּאַשְׁמְרוֹת אֶהְגֶּה־בְךָ: כִּי־הָיִיתָ עֲזָרְתָה לִּי וּבְצַל כְּנָפֶיךָ אֲרִנּוּ: דְּבָקָה נַפְשִׁי אַחֲרֶיךָ בִּי תִמְכָּה יְמִינְךָ: וְהִמָּה לְשׂוֹאֶה יִבְקָשׁוּ נַפְשִׁי יָבֹאוּ בְּתַחֲתִיּוֹת הָאָרֶץ: יִגִּירָהּ עַל־יַד־חֶרֶב מָנַת שְׁעָלִים יִהְיוּ: וְהִמָּלֶךְ יִשְׁמַח בְּאֱלֹהִים יִתְהַלֵּל כָּל־הַנִּשְׂבָּע בּוֹ כִּי יִסְכֹּר פִּי דוֹבְרֵי־שָׁקֶר:
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Psalm 42 - צְמָאָה נַפְשִׁי - Joey Weisenberg

כְּאַיִל תַּעֲרֹג עַל־אֲפִיקֵי־מַיִם כֵּן נַפְשִׁי תַעֲרֹג אֵלֶיךָ אֱלֹהִים
צְמָאָה נַפְשִׁי לְאֱלֹהִים לְאֵל חַי

“Like a deer longs for a channel of water, thus my soul longs for you, Oh God.
My soul thirsts for God, the ever-living God.”

1 To the lead player, a <i>maskil</i> for the Korahites 2 Like a deer longs for a channel of water, thus my soul longs for you, Oh God 3 My soul thirsts for God, the ever-living God. When will I come to appear before the face of God? 4 My tears were my food day and night. They say to me all the day, “where is your God?” 5 When I recall this, I pour out my soul, I passed through with them slowly, to the house of God. Voices shouting thanks in crowds of the pilgrimage festival. 6 Why, so downcast my soul? Why so disquieted within me? Have hope in God, I will praise God for God’s salvation. 7 My God, my soul is downcast. Thus I remember you, in the land of Jordan and Hermon, from Mt. Mihza 8 The depths call to the depths in the voice of your waters, and all your channels of the water and your waves swept over me 9 Daily, Adonai commands God’s kindness, and nightly a song is with me, a prayer to God of my life 10 I say to El, my rock, “why have you forgotten me? Why do I walk in darkness, oppressed by my enemy?” 11 Shattering my bones, my enemies taunt me. They say to me all the day “where is your God?” 12 Why, so downcast my soul? Why so loud within me? Have hope in God, I will praise God for God’s salvation.. My God.	לְמַנְצֵחַ מִשְׁכִּיל לְבְנֵי־קֶרַח: כְּאַיִל תַּעֲרֹג עַל־אֲפִיקֵי־מַיִם כֵּן נַפְשִׁי תַעֲרֹג אֵלֶיךָ אֱלֹהִים: צְמָאָה נַפְשִׁי לְאֱלֹהִים לְאֵל חַי מְתִי אָבוֹא וְאֶרְאֶה פְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים: הִתְהַלֵּלִי דְמַעְתִּי לֶחֶם יוֹמָם וּלְיָלָה בְּאָמַר אֵלִי כִּלְהֵיוֹם אֵיךְ אֵלֶיךָ: אֵלֶּה אֶזְכְּרָה וְאֶשְׁפָּכָה עָלַי נַפְשִׁי כִּי אֶעְבֹּר בְּסֶף אֲדִידִם עַד־בֵּית אֱלֹהִים בְּקוֹל־רִנָּה וְתוֹדָה הַמּוֹן חוֹגֵג: מִה־תִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה נַפְשִׁי וּתְהַמִּי עָלִי הוֹחֲלִי לְאֱלֹהִים כִּי־עוֹד אוֹדְנִי יְשׁוּעוֹת פְּנִי: אֱלֹהֵי עָלִי נַפְשִׁי תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה עַל־כֵּן אֶזְכְּרָה מִאֲרָץ יְרֵדוֹ וְתִרְמוֹנִים מִהֵר מִצָּעַר: תְּהוֹם־אֶל־תְּהוֹם קוֹרָא לְקוֹל צְנוּרִיךָ כִּלְמִשְׁבָּרִיךָ וְגִלְיָה עָלִי עֲבְרוּ: יוֹמָם יִצְוֶה יְהוָה חֲסִדּוֹ וּבְלִילָה שִׁירָה עָמִי תִפְלָה לְאֵל חַי: אוֹמְרָה לְאֵל סִלְעִי לְמָה שְׁכַחְתָּנִי לְמָה־קִּדַּר אֶלְךָ בְּלַחֲץ אוֹיֵב: בְּרִצָּח בְּעִצְמוֹתַי חֲרַפּוֹנִי צוּרִי בְּאֶמְרָם אֵלִי כִּלְהֵיוֹם אֵיךְ אֵלֶיךָ: מִה־תִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה נַפְשִׁי וּמִה־תְהַמִּי עָלִי הוֹחֲלִי לְאֱלֹהִים כִּי־עוֹד אוֹדְנִי יְשׁוּעוֹת פְּנִי וְאֱלֹהֵי
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Psalm 121 - אֲשָׁא עֵינַי - Ben Steinberg

שִׁיר לַמַּעֲלוֹת

אֲשָׁא עֵינַי אֶל־הַהָרִים מֵאֵין יְבֹא עֲזָרִי
עֲזָרִי מֵעַם יְהוָה עֹשֶׂה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ
אֶל־יִתֵּן לְמוֹט רַגְלִי אֶל־יָנוּם שֹׁמְרִי
הַגֵּבָה לֹא־יָנוּם וְלֹא יִישָׁן שׁוֹמֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל
יְהוָה שֹׁמְרִי יְהוָה צִלְּיָי עַל־יַד יְמִינִי
יוֹמָם הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ לֹא־יַכְכָּה וַיָּרֶחַ בַּלַּיְלָה
יְהוָה יִשְׁמְרֵךְ מִכָּל־רָע יִשְׁמַר אֶת־נַפְשִׁי
יְהוָה יִשְׁמַר־צִאתִי וּבֹאִי מֵעַתָּה וְעַד־עוֹלָם

A Song of Ascents:

I lift my eyes to the mountains. From where will my help come?
My help comes from Adonai, the one who makes heaven and earth.
He will not let your foot slip, your guardian will not slumber.
Behold, the guardian of Israel will not slumber and will not sleep.
Adonai is your guardian, Adonai is your shadow at your right hand.
Daily the sun will not strike, nor the moon by night.
Adonai will guard you from all trouble, and guard your soul.
Adonai will guard your going and coming now and forever.

Psalm 130 - מִמַּעַמְקִים - Shirona

שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת
מִמַּעַמְקִים קָרָאתִיךָ יְהוָה
אֲדֹנָי שְׁמָעָה בְּקוֹלִי תִהְיֶינָה אָזְנוֹיךָ קֹשְׁבוֹת לְקוֹל תַּחֲנוּנָי
אִם־עֲוֹנוֹת תִּשְׁמְרֶנָּה אֲדֹנָי מִי יַעֲמִיד
כִּי־עַמָּךְ הִסְלִיחָה לְמַעַן תִּוָּרָא

A song of ascents:
From the depths I call you, Adonai.
Adonai, listen to my voice. Let your ears become attentive to the voice of my
plea.
If you keep account of iniquity, oh Yah. Adonai, who will endure?
Because with you is forgiveness in order that you may be revered.

קִוִּיתִי יְהוָה קִוְּתָה נַפְשִׁי וְלִדְבָרוֹ הוֹחֵלְתִּי
נַפְשִׁי לֹאֲדֹנָי מִשְׁמָרִים לִבְקָר שְׁמָרִים לִבְקָר
יַחַל יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־יְהוָה כִּי־עַם־יְהוָה הִתְקַסַּד וְהִרְבָּה עֲמוֹ פְדוּת
וְהוּא יַפְדֶּה אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִכָּל עֲוֹנוֹתָיו

I hope for Adonai, my soul hopes for him. I wait for his word.
My soul is eager for Adonai, more than night-watchers for morning,
night-watchers for morning.
Wait, O Israel, for Adonai, for with Adonai is loving-kindness, and much power to
redeem.
And He will redeem Israel from all their iniquities.

Psalm 13 - עֵד־אֲנָהּ - Miqedem

לְמַנְצֵחַ מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד
עֵד־אֲנָהּ יְהוָה תִּשְׁכַּחֲנִי נָצַח עֵד־אֲנָהּ תִּסְתִּיר אֶת־פָּנֶיךָ מִמֶּנִּי
עֵד־אֲנָהּ אֲשִׁית עֲצוֹת בְּנַפְשִׁי יִגּוֹן בְּלִבִּי יוֹמָם עֵד־אֲנָהּ יָרוּם אִיְבִי עָלַי
הִבִּיטָה עֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי הָאֲרֶזָּה עֵינֵי פֶן־אִישׁן הַמָּוֶת
פֶּן־יֹאמַר אִיְבִי יִכְלֹתִיו צָרִי יִגִּילוּ כִּי אָמוּט
וְאֲנִי בַחֲסֶדְךָ בְּטַחַתִּי יִגַּל לִבִּי בִישׁוּעָתְךָ אֲשִׁירָה לַיהוָה כִּי גָמַל עָלַי

For the leader, A Psalm of David:

How long, Adonai? Will you ignore me forever? How long will you hide your face
from me?

How long will I have cares on my mind, grief in my heart daily? How long will my
enemy rise up against me?

Look at me. Answer me, Adonai, my God. Illumine my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep
of death.

Lest my enemies say, "I have overcome him". My foes rejoice when I totter.
But, in your loving-kindness, I trust my heart will exult in your salvation. I will
sing to Adonai, for he has been good to me.

Psalm 61 - Cantor Becky Mann

שְׁמָעָה אֱלֹהִים רִנָּתִי הַקְשִׁיבָה תְּפִלָּתִי

From the end of the Earth I call to You
From the end of the Earth I call
When my heart is faint, You guide my way
And I rise above my Rock, my strength

כִּי־הָיִיתָ מַחְסֶה לִּי מִגְדָּל־עֹז מִפְּנֵי אוֹיֵב

1 For the lead player, with instrumental music, Of David:

2 Hear my cry, oh God, be attentive to my prayer.

3 From the end of the Earth to you I will call. When my heart is faint, you lead me to a rock that is high above me.

4 For you have been a shelter to me. A tower of strength in the face of an enemy.

5 Let me dwell in your tent forever. let me take shelter under your wings, Selah

6 For you, God, have heard my vows. You have granted the plea of those who fear your name.

7 Add days to the days of the King. His years like those of the generations

8 May he dwell forever in the presence of God, steadfast loving-kindness will preserve him.

9 Thus I will sing your name forever, as I keep my vows day after day.

לְמַנצַח עַל־נְגִינַת לְדָוִד:

שְׁמָעָה אֱלֹהִים רִנָּתִי הַקְשִׁיבָה תְּפִלָּתִי:

מִקְצֵה הָאָרֶץ אֵלֶיךָ אֶקְרָא בְּעֹטָף לִבִּי

בְּצוּר־יְרוּם מִמְּנֵי תַנְחֵנִי:

כִּי־הָיִיתָ מַחְסֶה לִּי מִגְדָּל־עֹז מִפְּנֵי אוֹיֵב:

אֶגִּוְרָה בְּאֶהְלֶךְ עוֹלָמִים אַחֲסֶה בְּסִתֵּר כְּנָפֶיךָ

סֵלָה:

כִּי־אַתָּה אֱלֹהִים שְׁמַעַתָּ לְנַדְרֵי נְתַתָּ יְרֵשֶׁת יִרְאִי

שְׁמֶךָ:

יָמִים עַל־יְמֵי־מְלֹךְ תוֹסִיף שְׁנוֹתָיו כְּמוֹ־דֹר וְדֹר:

יָשָׁב עוֹלָם לִפְנֵי אֱלֹהִים חֶסֶד וְאַמֶּת מִן יִנְצְרֶהוּ:

כֵּן אֶזְמְרָה שְׁמֶךָ לְעַד לְשִׁלְמֵי נְדָרֵי יוֹם יוֹם:

Where Might I Go to Find You - Cantor Ellen Dreskin & Dan Nichols
(From a piyyut by Yehuda HaLevi)

יְהוָה, אֲנִי אֶמְצְאֶךָ	דִּרְשֵׁתִי קִרְבְּתֶךָ
מְקוֹמֶךָ נִעְלָה וְנִעְלָם	בְּכָל־לִבִּי קִרְאתִיךָ
וְאֲנִי לֹא אֶמְצְאֶךָ	וּבִצְאתִי לְקִרְאתֶךָ
כְּבוֹדְךָ מְלֵא עוֹלָם	לְקִרְאתִי מִצְּאֵתֶךָ

“Yah, Where Shall I find You? Your place is high and hidden. Where shall I not find You? The world is full of your glorious presence. I have sought your closeness, with all my heart I call You. In my going out to meet You, I found You coming to meet me.”

Another translation:

“Where might I go to find You, Exalted, Hidden One? Where would I not go to find You, Everpresent, Eternal One? My heart cries out to You: please draw near to me. The moment I reach out for You, I find You reaching in for me”¹

This text is an excerpt from a piyyut by Yehuda HaLevi.. These particular verses focus on the same feelings explored throughout the other psalms in this project. There is a real questioning of God's presence, and a longing being expressed with one's heart crying out to the divine. Even with the questions of where and how to maintain connection, there is a sense of assuredness in the final statement. When one is reaching outward towards God, there is a reciprocal action being made by the divine to draw in closer towards them.

When I have found myself in moments where I need comfort and a reassurance of my own connection to God, I have turned to this piyyut. This setting by Cantor Ellen Dreskin and Dan Nichols, as well as the version by Alan Goodis, have been two of my favorites for many years. These songs played a large role in my inspiration for this entire thesis project, and in particular for this musical recital.

¹ English from the lyrics of “To Find You” by Alan Goodis - Another setting of the piyyut by Yehuda HaLevi, translated by Joel Hoffman & Larry Hoffman

Closing Thoughts

The melody of “Where Might I Go to Find You” reflects a sense of longing and desire and can represent the ways in which the other songs of this project achieve similar goals of expression of the texts through music. The song begins in a low register and climbs to a higher octave in the niggun, which to me, represents the notion of reaching upwards to the divine. The niggun itself allows for an expression of emotions that words cannot necessarily capture. When words fail to describe how we are feeling, music aids us by filling the space.

The other pieces of music chosen for this project reflect the text of the psalms in similar ways. Shirona’s Psalm 130 calls out from the depths with a melody that starts low which, when combined with other instruments and dynamics, reflects a place of lowness, both physically and emotionally. Steinberg’s Psalm 121, in its opening line, propels the voice upwards just as the text explains that the speaker is lifting their eyes upwards towards the mountains. The shifts in tempo and the volume in dynamics of the voice translate into a sense of questioning and then a feeling of assuredness in the words of the text, which is reflected in the voice of the singer. In Miqedem’s Psalm 13, the song finishes in a repetition in the final line of text *Ashira L’Adonai*, “I will sing to God”, while the music itself builds in an exultant way to express the confident nature of the words.

Each one of these pieces of music reflects the text of the psalms in their own unique way. While writing my thesis, I have been able to explore the psalms in depth and begin to understand their layered meanings and emotional undertones. Through the addition of this recital, I have had the opportunity to dive deeply into how these texts come to life through music. Some of the melodies featured have been known to me for many years, and others I have discovered through preparing this recital. This project has created an outlet for my own personal expression through music, something which I am passionate about and hope to continue sharing with communities as I continue on my way as a soon-to-be Rabbi. I hope to share this project with both the HUC-JIR community and others in my future as well. I plan to eventually adapt the discoveries of my thesis project into many different forms, including teaching, prayer, and shared communal singing in all moments in which people thirst for God’s closeness and need comfort, as called for in these psalms.

I am immensely grateful to everyone who has contributed to making this recital possible...

Cantor Josh Breitzer

Dr. Adriane Leveen

Elana Arian

Ivan Barenboim

Sierra Fox

Kevin McKenzie

Lauren Roth

Cantor Becky Mann

Marcus Villegas & Edgar Rivera

The entire HUC Maintenance Staff

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Cantor Jenna Mark

Jordan Wilesnky

My mom, Randi

My big brother, Logan & my sister-in-law, Gaby

All of my family & friends

THANK YOU! :)