

“Things Fall Apart”
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When I was a kid, a movie came out that was hilarious in the way that only old-fashioned comedies could be hilarious.

What I mean is that in those long-ago, pre-Seinfeld comedy days, a comedy had to be plot-driven. This one was. It was a wacky plot. On some mythic shore community in New England named “Gloucester Island,” probably understood to be just off Cape Cod, a Russian submarine runs aground and is forced to surface. And the Russian sailors find themselves wandering around. (They’re looking for a boat to pull their submarine free from the sandbar.) The locals think that the Russians are invading, and, well, you can imagine the mayhem that ensues. Alluding to the famous line attributed to Paul Revere, the film was called, “The Russians are coming, the Russians are coming!”

Go here for one of the trailers advertising the film:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEhiKNyPNeM> .

One of the famous lines from the movie was delivered by Russian sailors who encounter people on the street and, in thick Russian accents, utter the words, “*Emergency, Emergency: everybody to get from street!*” (Go here to see that: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2TszIJX-F4U> .)

The movie had a great cast, by the way: Jonathan Winters; Alan Arkin; Eva Marie Saint; Theodore Bikel as the Russian submarine captain; and several other great character actors.

The movie was hilarious because, even though it was made during the heart of the Cold War, it was obvious that *these* Russians -- the ones depicted in the film --



didn't pose a threat. In fact, they were buffoonish. They were silly. They were friendly. They couldn't shoot their way out of a paper bag.

At the same time, this was the era when "Failsafe" was written and turned into a film. That work captured the fear that nuclear war could come about through a minor electrical short circuit or a foolish miscalculation. "The Russians are Coming, The Russians are Coming" sought to demonstrate that it was possible on the one hand to be terrified by the Russians and, on the other hand, to laugh at the anxiety we felt about them.

Fast forward about fifty years, and here we are: American politics are swirling around the rumors -- rumors that seem slowly but surely to be getting confirmed -- that Russian operatives (don't you like that word, "operative"?) took steps to alter the results of our national election this past November. There are many puzzling aspects to this national scandal. Some people whom you'd think would be enormously distrustful of the Russians seem to be indifferent, even blase, about these efforts. Some see this as a source of entertainment, as one big joke. Back in the day when "The Russians are Coming, the Russians are Coming" was produced, it was daring to make a joke about the Russians; today, it doesn't seem daring at all.

The role being played by Russians in our national life is changing unexpectedly and dramatically. Just a few weeks ago (on May 10th), a day after firing the Director of the FBI, apparently for refusing to suppress an investigation into Russian meddling in the election, our President entertained visitors from Russia -- including the Russian ambassador -- in the Oval Office, yet refused to permit American reporters from documenting the event! Only photographers from Tass, the Russian state press agency, were permitted to enter and photograph the event. Really? What's going on?

Back in the 1970s, I remember seeing a book on someone's desk with a catchy title: "*Things Fall Apart.*" Written by Chinua Achebe, an African writer, in 1958, it poignantly describes the challenges posed to traditional Nigerian society by the arrival of colonial visitors, including missionaries, who sought to alter traditional ways.

The title is taken from the great poem, “The Second Coming,” by William Butler Yeats, whose opening lines read:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world...

* * * * *

Why do things seem to be falling apart? The country, after all, seems to be in turmoil:

The former FBI Director recently testified that he felt the need to document his conversation with the President because he was concerned that the President was going to lie about it later. What are we to make of this?

And we’re not alone. England is also in turmoil. A few months ago, in a surprise vote, the people of the United Kingdom rebuked their Prime Minister and decided to leave the European Union. Then, just the other day, the new Prime Minister, instead of cementing her lead, loses “big time.”

Strange things seem to be happening. What’s this all about?

Maybe we can get a hint, and maybe we can get some solace, from the *parashah* of the week.

Today’s *parashah* is extraordinary. The part we read today, the beginning, is sublime. We see a beautiful, static picture of Aaron and his sons lighting the lights in the tabernacle, illuminating Israel in the darkness. Beautiful.

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron, and say to him, “When you mount the lamps, let the seven lamps give light at the front of the

lampstand.” Aaron did so; he mounted the lamps at the front of the lampstand, as the LORD had commanded Moses.

The text continues, in a sublime vein. Repeatedly, we are told that the Israelites did exactly as God had commanded Moses. (See Numbers 8:3,4, 20, 22; 9:5.) Then, we are told that all the Israelites had to do to determine when to remain in the camp and when to move on was to watch the cloud covering the Tabernacle, in the middle of the camp:

At the command of the LORD the Israelites broke camp, and at a command of the LORD they made camp; they remained encamped as long as the cloud stayed over the Tabernacle. ... Whether it was two days or a month or a year -- however long the cloud lingered over the Tabernacle -- the Israelites remained encamped and did not set out; only when it lifted did they break camp. On a sign from the LORD they made camp and on a sign from the LORD they broke camp; they observed the LORD’s mandate at the LORD’s bidding through Moses. (Number 9: 18-23)

And yet, very soon thereafter, things begin to fall apart.

The people begin to complain. *Vayehi ha-am k’miton’nim*. (Numbers 11:1) Actually, it isn’t fair to say that that the people BEGIN to complain. They CONTINUED to complain, as they had complained since leaving Egypt--indeed, since BEFORE leaving Egypt! Literally, it was “*as if they were in mourning.*” (That’s what the Hebrew word, “*k’mit’on’nim*” means.) And why? Why were they so upset?

They were complaining about the food, about its variety. That’s what they were complaining about.

And so, they rebel against Moses. They clearly are very, very unhappy.

And before long, they ruin everything. At the beginning of the *parashah*, they are *this close* to getting to the Promised Land! But by the end of next week’s

parashah, they've been condemned to wander in the Wilderness for forty years, condemned never to enter the land at all.

What's the lesson here? It seems to be that, though the Israelites deserved to be freed from Egyptian slavery, their subsequent ungrateful behavior condemned them not to make it all the way to Israel.

This seems to reflect some kind of social **entropy**. Entropy is a principle of thermodynamics -- which I studied in college. This principle -- often misunderstood -- is that there is a drive toward disorder in the world.

There is such a drive. And yet, it's not invincible. It can be overcome, if -- but only if -- considerable energy is expended.

America is a wealthy, prosperous, free country. Yet it seems as though, in some inscrutable way, a drive toward social disorder has taken hold. Our political system, our government, seems mired in dysfunction and chaos.

What is the appeal of chaos? Why have we freely chosen (assuming, of course, that our recent election accurately reflected the national will) national leaders who seem incapable of working together, of advancing the national interest, of maintaining consistent policies, of developing consensus?

We can ask the same questions of the Children of Israel in our *parashah*. Why was it appealing to them to throw away the opportunity to enter the Promised Land?

Is the answer that it is human nature to lose hope? That it is human nature to throw away the baby with the bath water? That it is human nature to wreck the furniture and the dishes and to start over?

It may be.

So what can we do about that?

I think that we can learn a lesson from thermodynamics: It is possible to overcome disorder, and even the drive to disorder. However, it takes energy. One must invest energy in order to overcome disorder. One cannot merely be complacent. One cannot merely watch events go on, as if it's one long reality television show. Because if that's what we will do, then the drive toward disorder will only continue.

That's also the lesson of our *parashah*. Each and every night, when it gets dark, we have to light a lamp in the center of our camp. Now, of course, lighting a light can be a destructive act. You can light a lamp in order to set fire to something. But that's not what we're talking about here. We're talking about lighting a lamp, a *menorah*, of illumination.

And what does the light of that lamp symbolize? It symbolizes enlightenment. It symbolizes the values that we want to illuminate our lives. And what are those values? Values like truth, justice, compassion, and peace. These are the values at the heart of the camp of the Israelites. These are also the values at the heart of the enlightened nation that we call the United States of America.

Whether the Russians are to be trusted or feared; whether "the Russians are coming" -- or are already here, the values of our tradition -- truth, justice, compassion, and peace -- are the values that we have to hold fast to if we want to get through and live through and ultimately overcome the chaos around us.

And so, when it gets dark, let's ascend and light a lamp in the center of our camp. Let's illuminate our lives and our community with the light of Torah; the light of moral instruction; and the light of our values.

Shabbat shalom.