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 Devarim 5780

The Background Music of Life

לְכֹל זְמַן וְזְמַן לְכֹל-הַפֶּעַם תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם:

For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to reap that which is planted. A time to kill and a time to heal. A time to break down and a time to build.

These verses from Kohelet first became familiar to me from the folk song. Pete Seeger put these words to music in 1959. In 1965 the song, covered by the Byrds, reached the number one spot on Billboard's Hot 100 list - The song still holds the record for the number one single with the oldest lyrics. Or, you could say that Shlomo HaMelekh is the only Biblical king to have lyrical credit for a top single.

But, maybe, it isn't fair after all to credit King Solomon with "Turn, turn, turn." Pete Seeger's lyrics are based on the King James translation and there are significant distinctions between King James and the Hebrew original. Whereas King James opens with an optimistic "for everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven" a more faithful translation would be "Everyone is in a season, for there is a time of doing each thing in this world."

Likewise, the "catalogue of times" should be translated "a time of giving birth and a time of dying, a time of planting and a time of uprooting what is planted. A time of killing and a time of healing." etc. The "lamed" is not used here to mean "to" but rather "of."

More importantly, Pete Seeger's song ends one verse too early to understand the significance of Kohellet's words. The concluding words that are not in the song ask, "So what does a person gain from whatever he is working at?"

This is a completely different message. Lyrics like this wouldn't make it to Billboard. If the song claims that there is enough time for everything - just wait about and the next chance to do something will come along "never run for a bus; there will always be another." - Kohelet itself claims that we have little control over our lives or the world around us. There are times of building and there are times for dismantling. And woe to anyone who would attempt to build during a time of dismantling. And woe to anyone who tries to dismantle something that is meant to be built then The best we can do is hope to live in good times. Yet, from the perspective of infinite time, all that we accomplish will ultimately be undone - including, of course, our very lives.

This more sober analysis is contained in a short yet profound book called "In the Valley of the Shadow" which I thought about this week for the first time in many years and recommended it to someone to someone after not thinking about it for almost a decade. The book was published by Bible scholar James Kugel, one of the leading experts on ancient interpretations of Tanakh.

Twenty years ago, in the summer of 2000, Professor Kugel was diagnosed with a particularly aggressive form of cancer. His psychological state upon hearing such a grim prognosis was new and unsettling. Writing about his state of mind, in this book ten years later (and thankfully cancer free), Kugel wrote:

“The main change in my state of mind was that - I can’t think of a better way to put it - the background music suddenly stopped. It has always been there, the music of daily life that’s constantly going, the music of infinite time and possibilities; and now suddenly it was gone, replaced by nothing, just silence.”

Professor Kugel resolved that, should he have the chance, he would investigate that consciousness - the feeling when the background music was silenced - and that investigation became the book “In the Valley of the Shadow.” The book is a thoughtful exploration of a more primal and primitive element of religious consciousness - one that is still available to us - even if only at times. This is a religious awareness rooted in the knowledge that one stands as a small and frail individual, utterly dependent on other people, unable to affect the broad outside forces that impact one’s life, and ultimately completely dependent on God for all that one needs and values.

Professor Kugel’s book was started by a man thinking he would soon die. Sefer Devarim is a book written by a man who would soon die:

וַיְהִי בְּאַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה בְּעֶשְׂתֵּי-עָשָׂר חֹדֶשׁ בְּאַחַד לַחֹדֶשׁ דִּבֶּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כֹּלל אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה אֹתוֹ אֲלֵהֶם:

“And it was in the fortieth year in the eleventh month, on the first of the month that Moshe said to Benei Yisrael all that God had commanded him to tell them.”

Rashi notes that this date - Rosh Hodesh Shvat - was 37 days before Moshe’s death. Rashi explains that the rebuke in Sefer Devarim is the sort of message best suited to deathbed remarks and that is why both Yaakov and Yehoshua chose to offer rebuke immediately before they died. For Rashi this is because the harsh message will be more effective if it comes from someone facing imminent death.

There might be another reason why the content of Sefer Devarim was revealed and shared immediately prior to Moshe’s death.

Although God had earlier informed Moshe that he would not enter the land of Israel, the immediate awareness that he would soon die - the recognition that he would not cross over with the rest of Am Yisrael into the promised land, could have caused the sort of consciousness that Professor Kugel experienced after receiving his grim prognosis, the sort of awareness that inspired Kohelet to marvel at the inscrutability of the universe.

Without the “background music” of the illusion of infinite time, one can gain a special sort of insight and focus. This accounts for the timing of Sefer Devarim. When Moshe’s background music was silenced, Sefer Devarim, an explosion of prophecy containing some of the most inspiring words ever spoken followed.

We too can have access to a special sort of insight if we can quiet our own background music - but this music has grown louder over the centuries. The more secure we feel, the more confident we become in our ability to shape and control the world around us. The more we can accomplish in our lives - the stronger the illusion of infinite time and the harder it is to quiet the music.

We have gained much in our centuries long climb from primitive dependence on nature. We have, however, also lost something along the way. Our persona is now so stable that we don’t perceive God standing beside us. Most of our lives are filled with health, comfort, and dignity in ways that our ancestors could not have imagined - but as a result God is no longer self evident - there isn’t room for him where our ego has

expanded.

It takes a great shock to momentarily quiet the background music so we can hear God.

The world has been shocked to the core in the past six months. Our ability to make long term plans and our ability to even make short-term plans has been taken from us. My calendar is filled with canceled meetings, conferences, trips, and events. All of my prior expectations for this summer and the coming months have been overturned. And while I am grateful beyond words for my own personal good health, I am utterly shaken by the recognition that billions of other human beings join me in a common experience of fear and uncertainty. The expectations of what it means to be a modern human being have been taken from us.

Tonight begins shavua sh'hal bo - the immediate days leading up to Tisha B'Av. Tisha b'Av is a day that marks the culmination of a season where we remember our vulnerability. We remind ourselves of the recurring tragedies of Jewish history and face the consequences of a universe without a beit ha-mikdash as a spiritual support.

Hazal keenly felt the loss of the beit ha-mikdash and struggled to put into words the significance of facing the universe, not from the stance of religious confidence that comes from serving God in a glorious temple, but from the stance of dependence and vulnerability

Rabbi Pinhas ben Yair said, at the end of Tractate Sotah, When the Temple was destroyed both scholars and freemen were put to shame and went about with lowered heads. And men of great deeds were weakened, but men of violence and men of glibness became strong. And there are no longer any who seek knowledge, nor any that teach, nor does anyone even ask questions anymore. On whom can we rely? On our father in Heaven.

על מי יש להישען: על אבינו שבשמים.

For all the glory of the beit ha-mikdash, for all the wonder of having access to the Torah giants of prior generations - their absence eliminates self confidence as a possible religious feeling, silences the background music, and forces us to rely only on Our Father in Heaven.
Shabbat Shalom.