

In the Dark Times -- How Can I Keep From Singing

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In the gathering darkness of an early winter's evening soon after the election, soon after the year's turning, people milled about following the monthly Black Lives Matter vigil on Centre Street. No one seemed in any hurry to leave, needing just to be with each other for comfort and support, seeking connection, condensed breath hovering above, telling of inner warmth wherever people huddled. Song still lingering in the cold air from our closing, someone I have known for many years approached. With hand extended and a warm smile, he wished me, "happy new year," and asked, "how are you?" My response came slowly, not immediate, nor a question forthcoming in kind to know of his wellbeing, a non-answer to his greeting and one to him as though qualified, "happy new year in spite of it all." My friend stammered, as though feeling he had erred in seeking simply to wish me well. I am ashamed for the distress I had caused in that moment. The shame has stayed with me, still feeling the discomfort that filled the space between me and him, winter's chill that became colder still, reminding me of a truth I had forgotten. The nature of our day to day interactions affects the quality of our efforts to create a better world. When simple greetings become fraught, it is a sad reflection of the times, and of how the tensions we hold impede the change we seek. It seems so hard these days to plainly say, "I am well, thank you, and, tell me, how are you?"

In this season of renewal, one of the lessons we learn is that it is the little things that will make all the difference in our ability to keep on going, to keep on keeping on for justice, for freedom, for peace. As we sing and pray through the journey of these days, greetings joyfully exchanged, unabashed and unashamed, it is the way we shall also be when standing in vigil and walking on the way when praying with our legs. Finding strength and hope in each other's presence, every voice and spirit joined as one, In the Dark Times -- How Can I Keep from Singing?

I have struggled to make my way to these days. It has not been easy, as I'm sure for many of you. A reflection of the times, the fears and the worries, how to hold it all? Seeking solace and grounding, I have jumped from Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, to Bertolt Brecht, to Pete Seeger. I hear the song of Rebbe Nachman's soul, "The whole world is a very narrow bridge, and the main thing is not to be afraid at all." But we are afraid, how can we not be, so it must mean to keep going anyway, to carry our fears right across the bridge until we get to the other side. In a few short verses from Bertolt Brecht, I found words that soothed my soul, that spoke to what I had been looking for unknowing, yearning to know, to be reassured. In 1938, an exile from Nazi Germany, among the poems he wrote during what he called "the dark times:"

In the dark times

Will there also be singing?

Yes, there will also be singing.

About the dark times."

I have continued to sing. Sometimes about the dark times, sometimes just about life, about beauty in the world within us and around us. Sometimes just plain fun songs to sing with kids and giggle. Sometimes in prayer, sometimes as prayer. "They who sing, pray twice," proclaimed the words of an old poster, way back then on the walls of my college dorm room. I often find myself singing a song I shared in this space in November at a gathering of comfort and hope, when the dark times of now were just setting in. It is an old Quaker song, made more universal than in its earlier Christian roots, more political in the voice of Pete Seeger, of blessed memory. A song of spiritual resistance, gentle, persistent, and determined, a song to help us keep going. It is a song you know, even if you don't, because it is a song of the human spirit rising from within each of us, as though asking of Bertolt Brecht, and answering, *In the Dark Times -- How Can I Keep from Singing...?*

We can't, so let's sing together...:

*My life flows on in endless song
Above earth's lamentation.
I hear the real, though far off hymn
That hails a new creation*

*Above the tumult and the strife,
I hear the music ringing;
It sounds an echo in my soul
How can I keep from singing?*

It is more than a rhetorical question. As both Bertolt and Pete knew, if I can be so familiar, we can't keep from singing. Singing is an affirmation of the indomitable human spirit. It is a sign that we are here, *mir zeinen doh*, as sang Hirsch Glick, partisan poet of the Vilna ghetto in the darkest of times. We are here, we shall not give up or go away. Singing and song are about more than that of which we sing. It is simply that we sing that says we have not given up, that we have not given in to despair. Our singing need not be only about the dark times, as Brecht suggests it will be in the dark times, and yet it is. When we sing songs of love and hope, of fun and fancy, it is also about the dark times, but in a way that looks ahead from right within the darkness to the world we seek and would create. To sing of beauty, of hope, of fun in the dark times is to sing in a way that gives us strength to keep going until we get there. Singing in the dark times is a way to soothe the soul and nurture the good, to

give succor and solace in the way of prayer, to encourage, to challenge and inspire. It is also about much more, about something that is beyond itself.

A song is also a metaphor. Singing is about more than the songs we sing, about more even than the singing itself. If song is of the human spirit, then what is that spirit of which we sing? The breath of God breathed within is not meant to be breathed out in tongues of fire, in words and deeds that demean and destroy. The song of life is a song of goodness that recognizes every person as an instrument that sings Creation's song. The Torah itself is called a Song, "therefore choose life" its coda, words we sing in order to remember and remind, to give heed in matters great and small. Maine singer, sailor, songwriter, Gordon Bok, sings a question to each of us, "what is your life if it isn't a song...?" (Sing: *What is your life if it isn't a song? Way I go and lift it along... What is your life if it isn't a song?*) And following each singing through these days of God's attributes of compassion, we proclaim in song, *I am my prayer to you, God/Va'ani t'filati l'cha, ha'shem....*

Our deeds are songs that tell of who we are and of how we wish the world to be, every note a guide along the way. Every act of kindness is a song of resistance in the face of all that is harsh and brutal. Every act of decency and integrity sings out in perfect pitch to isolate in stark relief the off-key, to transcribe and transpose the seamy and sordid, children knowing intuitively the truer tune, the harmonious from the dissonant. Every act of compassion by people and nations is a song of hope that draws others to its chorus. "If one and one and fifty make a million," Pete sang, "we'll see that day come round." Every word spoken of truth to power with dignity and resolve is a song of justice rising up that will carry the people on its wings. When in the cold of a winter's night, friends from heart to heart freely greet, a song of warmth rises to embrace, friends and strangers all. In the way of our living, song becomes a metaphor for life itself and of love. If we don't sing along the way, how shall we ever get there, and merit to sing some day, *mir zeinen doh/we are here?* It is the nature of means and ends. In the Dark Times -- How Can I Keep From Singing?

It can be hard to sing these days for all that we see around us. But isn't that how it has always been in the dark times of every age? Bertolt Brecht asked if there would be singing in his own dark times, but he knew that we would ask the same question, that we too would need to sing in spite of all that we would see. We have seen Charlottesville and the marching of hate beneath nazi and Confederate flags, so hard to imagine, soul sickness sweeping over us as Jews with associations of the Holocaust, and over African Americans with associations of slavery. In a political climate that gives aid and comfort to hate, we have seen racism amplified. Black lives continue not to matter, justice denied and dreams deferred, and so we need to remind and be reminded that they do. We see anti-Semitism in ways raw and rank that have been hidden, dormant no longer, subtle memes and sinister words and signs of ancient hate. However to understand the twisted motives of the rock throwers, for the first time in twenty years the New England Holocaust Memorial was twice desecrated

this summer, the echo of shattering glass twice awakened in the Jewish psyche. There has also been a new song rising in common key and harmony that we need to hear as Christian and Muslim leaders reached out this summer in support, loudly decrying anti-Semitism along with racism and xenophobia. A new song needs to rise in the dark times of now, when we see those from other lands demeaned and denied, arriving desperate, as we did once, in steerage and in secret, sent back to our deaths in 1939 when hearts and doors were closed to the St. Louis. Bearing the image of God for all to see, there is no such thing as an undocumented human being. A new song rising to lift us up with them, a great opening of hearts and sanctuaries to welcome the stranger, as we are meant to do, commanded to do, as the Torah reminds some thirty-six times and tells us why, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. And we have had to see in the dark times of now the specter of nuclear holocaust renewed, the fire and fury of ill formed words and temperament. And the earth so sick with fever and storm, so hard to see now, what shall it be for our children and grandchildren, and theirs...?

There are times when we have had enough, when we can't take in any more, when we need to turn off the radio, to close the newspaper, to let the screen go dark in the dark times, needing just to close our eyes and be still. Sometimes we need to close our eyes to see more clearly. When the seeing is too much, just close your eyes. In the way that we screw up our eyes when experiencing pain, or as we squint to give sharper focus to our seeing, from out of his own great suffering, Rebbe Nachman offers a gentle teaching: *So it is when we want to look at the ultimate goal of Creation, which is all good, all unity. One has to close one's (physical) eyes and focus on one's vision -- i.e. the inner vision of the soul -- on the goal. For the light of this ultimate goal is very far away. The only way to see it is by closing one's eyes. One has to close them completely and keep them firmly shut. One may even have to press on them with one's finger to keep them shut tight. Then one can gaze on this ultimate goal...* (Likkutei Moharan 65:3, "Garden of the Souls").

In the dark times of exile, the Torah describes our response to all that we shall see, as though to give warning that we may need to close our eyes and look beyond, והיית משוגע ממראה עיניך אשר תראה / *v'hayita m'shuga mi'mareh eynecha asher tireh*/and you will go insane from the sight of your eyes that you will see (Deut. 28:34). How to sing then in the dark times, how to stay grounded in a strange land? Our ancestors going into exile in Babylon, taunted by their captors, could not sing, but only weep, and that is its own song: *By the rivers of Babylon/על נהרות בבל/al naharot bavel/we sat and wept as we remembered Zion....* (Sing: *By the rivers of Babylon, where we sat down, and there we wept, when we remembered Zion...*). *There on the willow trees we hung up our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs.... How can we sing God's song on foreign soil...* (Ps. 137)? Whether in the Hebrew cadence of the psalmist, or the Jamaican lilt of Bob Marley, somehow to look beyond oppression, beyond the moment, to sing a freedom song of coming home, wherever we are, welcoming all.

In the interplay between exile and return, in Torah and in life, there is a song. From the desert journey we looked ahead to when we would arrive and say *mir zeinen doh/ we are here*. Back and forth in time, imagining the future, the Torah also brings us to look back to the dark times of slavery, and to exile again if our way upon the land is not worthy. It is the vision and the way of which we sing. In the same Torah portion, *Parashat Ki Tavo*, that brings us to look at the harsh realities around us, to close our eyes at times as needed, a commandment is given that in its letter is no longer applicable, and in its spirit so urgently needed. Upon arrival in the land, the people are to bring with each harvest a gift of the first fruits. The bringing of the *Bikkurim* is accompanied by two requirements, a peace offering and a song (Mishna Bikkurim 2:4). A song! It is the only mitzvah with such a requirement. God wants to hear us sing!

That it be a peace song as our offering, flowing from a place of wholeness within ourselves out into the world, a Talmudic commentary speaks to the power of song to raise up the weary soul. It is in the *Eyn Ya'akov*, a beautiful work that highlights the rabbinic weaving of stories and legends as counterpoint to law in the Talmud. *Eyn Ya'akov*, meaning *Jacob's Eye*, refers to our ancestor Jacob, whose eyes, the Torah tells (Gen. 48:10), became heavy with age, כבדו מזוקן / *kavdu mi'zoken*, for all that he had seen, closing them now near the end of his life, unable to take in any more. The song to accompany the *Bikkurim* becomes our song, any song: וכמה תתעורר הנשמה מתוך הניגון / *v'kamah tit'orer han'shama mitoch ha'nigun v'ha'shir/how the soul is awakened from within the tune and the song to lift itself up and to rise from the material realm to the heavens of the Creator's dwelling* (Iyun Ya'akov to Arachin 11a). Making it even more personal, perhaps drawing from the wellspring of *Eyn Ya'akov*, seeing into the soul's depth, *ayin* meaning both eye and wellspring, Rebbe Nachman advises each of us: *therefore it is good to accustom oneself to refresh one's essence in every moment with a particular tune, to gladden one's soul, and in this way to cleave oneself to the Blessed Name...* (Likutei Eytzot, N'gina). Well attuned, In the Dark Times, How can I Keep from Singing...?

Bikkurim as first fruits are not the full harvest, nor is their song the full song. First fruits are but a beginning, a promise of what is to come if with hands and heart we labor and love hard enough, all of us working and singing together. Our first fruits are the small accomplishments, the little "victories" of day to day interactions through which we bring a little bit nearer the great repair of justice and peace. Our ways of kindness and caring are the first fruits of a better time in which compassion informs the way of interaction among people and peoples, politics and policies among nations and within societies, when war and injustice shall be no more. That time begins now, with us. Accompanied by a song, every act of resistance to the callous and cruel is a gift of first fruits that raises our own spirits in the process. Every song we sing is its own offering and way of inspiration. Every song we sing along the way when praying with our legs needs to be true to the full song to come.

It is about means and ends, the fullness of the song recognized in its first notes. Anticipating the day that is all Shabbat shalom in our making of Shabbos each week, it is about living the future now, of being the change we wish to see. Singers of the song, keepers of the flame, the vision is the way, if we would get there. It is about now and then, but as hard as it is at times to believe and affirm, it cannot be about us and them. In the way of true nonviolent resistance, our love needs to be so fiercely gentle and sure that it becomes clear to those who oppose us and to all of those who watch unsure that they too are included in our love for humanity. At the full harvest, our song will need to include everyone.

Singing in the dark times is about our own well being, as well as that of earth and sky and water, and all the people with whom we share this planet. We are each a beloved part of creation, and, therefore, part of its preservation. There is no more urgent work for any of us than preserving the planet, and the possibility of a human and humane future. Yet, no one can go to every demonstration, but someone else will be there in our stead. No one can write every letter or hold every sign or answer every call, but someone else will answer in our stead. No one can sing every part of the song, but listen, hear the voices rising all around. Knowing their own dark times, the rabbis taught long ago, לא עליך המלאכה לגמור / *lo alecha ham'lacha ligmor* / *it is not on you to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it* (Pirke Avot 2:16).

"In the dark times, will there also be singing...?" Yes, because life needs to go on if we shall emerge into the sunlight, if we shall know the song when we arrive and can finally sing *mir zeinen doh/we are here*. For those who struggle with how to be in school now, we need the gifts of your learning and skills. For those who question whether to bring children into such a troubled world and time, we need the promise of little ones nurtured with your love and compassion, that they shall learn and do. "How can I keep from singing" is a rhetorical question. I can't keep from singing. Of God's song within each of us yearning to emerge, from 11th century Spain, Solomon Ibn Gabirol sings: "If the human song be good to you, Your praises will I sing as long as God's breath is within me."

The song we sing is the song of life, sacred tune carried from the beginning, when the breath of God hovered over the face of the waters and gently breathed into being the world whose birth we celebrate today. Breathed into the first human and every single one since, God's breath becomes our song, the song of creation, song of life, song of the world within each one. Every breath is the making of a song. Every breath is its own song. Breath condensing above the crowd on a cold winter's night, song surrounding, inner warmth from one to another embracing those who gather for the sake of justice, for the sake of hope, just needing to be with each other. Greetings offered from heart to heart, a hand extended and received, unafraid and unashamed. In the Dark Times..., How Can I Keep From Singing...?

Sing together, drift into tune as nigun following the words...:

*My life flows on in endless song
Above earth's lamentation.
I hear the real, though far off hymn
That hails a new creation*

*Above the tumult and the strife,
I hear the music ringing;
It sounds an echo in my soul
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