

THE SUMMER TENANTS
And the Blessings of Impermanence
Rabbi Victor Hillel Reinstein
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For Mieke

For several years we had hoped to have summer tenants. The small yellow house behind our own seemed so inviting, but for one reason or another it never happened. We were not sure why, perhaps poor advertising, or the size, or the rent. But this summer was different. Finally, we had tenants. We derived much pleasure and much teaching about life from the family who came to be with us. They were a family of wrens, at first only two, who had found the little yellow bird house that Tzvia had made at camp in the summer of the fifth grade. Its color faded, it had been suggested that it was too bright at first. Suspended by its now-rusted chain from under the corner eaves of the garage roof, it sways gently on warm summer breezes.

The wrens were an important part of our summer. On long Shabbos afternoons we would sit in the yard and watch them, mesmerized. Sometimes we watched over lunch from the table close to the house, and at other times from the bench in what we call the meditation garden, just a short diagonal distance from the little yellow house the wrens came to call home. We first noticed them in early June from the garden bench, Mieke excitedly pointing and saying, "I think we have tenants!" Small brown birds, they seemed to be in constant motion, wings whirring as though propelled by a motor. With each trip abroad they flew back to the bird house with a piece of branch or a bit of grass or leaf held in their beaks. We watched as they created a nest inside, fashioning the place they would call home. Fortunately, we had provided an unfurnished house.

The bird house is square, four sides rising from the flat bottom to the flat roof that is hinged to the back. There is a small round entrance with a piece of dowel protruding as a perch just beneath it. Sometimes the birds would remarkably fly straight through the front door without stopping. More often, they would pause on the dowel, and from that intended perch hop up and in. Sometimes they would pause for a moment atop the gate below. It is a green gate standing whimsically askew among the flowers, no longer part of a fence through which to allow passage. On the gate, a panel of yellow wood with green lettering announces "Mieke's Garden," a reminder of another time and place, love's garden blossoming, a gift I had once made to open the way to courtship.

Whatever the nature of love among birds, from some truth must come the notion of "love birds." The emotional content of their love I cannot judge, from outside another's nest difficult enough to know the ways of human love. But we would do well in the showing of love and friendship to be like these two wrens. Each as help meet to the other, working side by side in the building of a home and planning for the future, yet joyful in the moment. One was as industrious as the other, not wont to compete in the doing, but to complete the task together. Their flight was a dance, swirling and soaring, breathtaking to behold, such little creatures, each one searching for part of what was needed, then returning to each other in the warming of their home. Most of all it was their song, sung at times in duet and then as gift for the other, and when apart a calling to remember, a low and throaty chirp quickly rising up, as wind giving lift beneath the wing.

The nest was soon finished, and the daily pattern of our tenants changed. It seemed that only one of the wrens now took flight from their front stoop. It was a time of anticipation and of great expectation, theirs and ours. And then came the day we had been waiting for, as though announced in the morning paper. We felt a certain pride and joy that made us laugh, as though we had something to do with it. In fact, we did. Now we could see further change in the pattern even of the one, who seemed to dart constantly out into the world and back again to the nest. On each return trip there was food in its beak. On each arrival to the nest, there would be from the baby wrens a cacophonous chorus of appreciation. Every day we made time to watch, sometimes alone, sometimes together, occasionally craning our necks and standing as high as we could, trying to look in and see the little ones. Unable to, we wondered if future tenants would mind our voyeurism if we replaced one side of their house with plexi-glass. For about two weeks, the wrens were a major part of our conversation. We delighted in the opportunity to learn about the life of wrens, and amid the vibrant beauty of a summer's garden to reflect together on life itself.

One morning, as I came out into the yard for the day's first observation, I was startled to see Mieke standing there with tears in her eyes. Putting my hand on her shoulder, I asked what was wrong, seeking to soothe, but afraid to know. "I think they've left," she said, now gently sobbing. I knew that she cried not only for the parting of the wrens, but for the fleeting days of summer and the fleeting nature of life itself. There was release in her tears, emotion flowing for the recent surgery I had had, and the waiting to know the yes or no of tests, relief now acknowledged. As we held each other, she said, "I'm crying for life's impermanence."

For a time we thought we heard the song of the wrens from a tree in a neighboring yard. We were not ready for them to go away so soon. Fragments of another song came

to mind, of innocence and imagination taking flight: "A dragon lives forever, but not so little boys (and girls)..., One gray night it happened..., green scales fell like rain, Puff no longer went to play along the cherry lane..." And so too, not to live forever, the adults that little girls and little boys become. We dream, we imagine, we build nests, and try so hard to hold on to a thread of innocence, knowing within that only dragons live forever, however much they sorrow for the playmates they once had. Unaware of their own impermanence, our wrens lived life so fully, with gusto, always busy, and always with a song. To hear the songs of innocent beauty in the world, of mortality unaware, whether of children, or of wind upon the trees, of a brook or baby babbling, or of our little wrens, helps us to see beyond impermanence with an invitation to join in Creation's chorus.

That is part of the secret for we who of mortality are aware, to sing a song transcendent, and remember that we are part of the beauty all around. God cries too for our impermanence, perhaps as we for the fleeting days of the wrens, watering the garden with tears, flowers to blossom unaware of their beauty. Images that come from down the years of our peoples' wisdom, of God crying with us, shedding two great tears each night for our sorrows, give me comfort. Of length of days we have no say, but to choose the way of blessing, adding life to the days we have is in our hands every day.

My mother's favorite flower was Lily of the Valley, as it is mine. Such a simple teacher of life, the little white flower of bowed head on green stalk knowing not of its impermanence, but helping us to draw meaning from our own. As shared in a letter to her upon her death:

*Your way in the world was ever so gentle, mom.
You life was a breath of God that caressed the flowers you loved.
And the flowers sang back to you, their friend who knew them all by name.
Lily of the Valley, my favorite and yours, we often lamented with each other the shortness of their season;
As we smiled upon their beauty and breathed their fragrance, thankful for their time among us.*

My mother, as some of you know from other times I've shared, always carried a small folding magnifying glass around her neck. Ever the science teacher, she introduced us to the small worlds that abound in field and forest and along the shore or in the backyard, to show us the miracles all around. She lived the prayer we say three times each day, "וועל נסיך שבכל יום עמנו / מודים אנחנו לך / We give thanks to You, God..., for Your miracles that are with us every day...." To be curious and want to know of the world in which we live is to celebrate beauty that like ours is impermanent. We need to open our eyes and sing out praise. I became aware only recently of summer's red berries on the Lily of the Valley plants around the yard. I was startled to realize that I had never noticed them before. Perhaps you have. They bear the seeds of beauty to come, of Lilies of the Valley yet to be. I went out recently to examine them. They seem much

larger to me than one might expect for such a small delicate plant. As my mother might have done, I went out with a pocket knife and the magnifying glass she gave me. These red berries look much like a cherry tomato, soft and juicy, though of very different seed within, two or three shiny and moist, a light green, as magnified beneath the glass appearing like a succulent grape.

We learn priorities from the little birds and flowers, and so much else of life teaching, in nature's open classroom, but we forget to keep them straight. Folk singer, sailor, and song-writer, Gordon Bok, puts it well in his "Turning Toward the Morning," both lament and celebration of impermanence underscored in the turning of the seasons, "It's a pity we don't know what the little flowers know, They can't face the cold November, they can't take the ice and snow, They put their glories all behind them, bow their heads and let it go, But you know they'll be there shining in the morning...."

Of things that shine so differently, we needed to get a new car this summer. When it was still quite new, we scraped it one day against a low stone wall as we backed out of the driveway. There were tears as we beheld the unsightly scrapes and dents where a moment ago it has still been all sleek and shiny. And we held each other and realized the difference in the tears shed then from those at the parting of the wrens. Though in truth, the lesson was the same. "It's only a car," we said to each other, having forgotten in the moment of frustration and disappointment what is most important, such as those priorities learned from little creatures and in the passing of time. There had been no accident, no harm to us or anyone else, just to some metal. However shiny it had been, not so shiny as a loving smile, or a bird on the wing. As my dad would always say in a forgiving way when we were young and leaning to drive, putting our marks upon the family car, "it's nothing that money can't fix."

Would that it were so for us. Money can't fix the breakdown of bodies, (though universal health care would help). And yet how much more durable we are than a shiny new car of steel and rubber and molded plastic. For all of our impermanence, the seed of eternity is planted within us. In the ability to recognize our impermanence, and in the courage to acknowledge it, we transcend it. All in one, we are both the fragile flower of green and white, and the seed berry that sings of nature's cycles and of the flower that will be there shining in the morning. One line in the blessing that follows the reading of a portion of Torah gives me shivers of gratitude and amazement when I hear it or say it, "Blessed are You God..., for You have planted eternal life within us/וְחַי עוֹלָם נֹטַע בְּתוֹכֵנוּ.

Our bodies are perishable and impermanent, our souls are not. The ripples our lives make upon the waters of time continue to flow out; waves of sound continuing to emanate, echoes of the songs we've sung never ceasing to pulsate. The words we've spoken, the insights and teachings we've shared continue to be carried, deeds of repair

and the doing of good continue beyond the time they were done. Of souls imperishable, relationships continue with dear ones who have gone, now in a different key. In the evening prayers said each night, I always linger with one verse, finding in it much more than words, but a meeting place in which to pause and converse in the language of the soul: "In Your hand, God, are the souls of the living and the dead / בידו נפשות החיים והמתים. In God's hand we are together, the souls of the living and the dead.

It is not that we don't at times rail against the night, wanting more time for ourselves and for those we love. We feel the ache of loss, anguish at times that shakes belief to its foundations. It is not that in moments of solitary contemplation we don't fear death or what it will be not to be. Would that the answer always came to me as readily in my own moments of fear as it did in one of the holiest, most awe-inspired moments that was given to me early in my rabbinic career. I was sitting by the hospital bedside of a woman whose soul was fluttering between two worlds. She had not spoken or opened her eyes for several days. Alone with her, with a dying person for the first time, I began to sing to Rose softly, a niggun, a soul tune that came to me of itself, as I held her hand. Hoping that it might have the same effect on her, the tune brought calm to me. As though in a trance, I continued to sing, until there came a moment when I noticed that her eyes had opened ever so slightly. Her lips seemed to move. I stopped singing and brought my head closer. In a labored, hoarse whisper, Rose asked, "What will it be like?" I was terrified at the thought of needing to answer. My mind raced, how could I know, what could I say? It was a question that begged for an answer, not of philosophy or theology, nor one that quavered with uncertainty. In the space of what seemed like the eternity that stood before us, an enveloping calm filled the room, the pure essence of life offered as a gift by a soul about to depart its earthly home of not enough years. From somewhere out of the calm, words came to me through the stillness, "It will be all shalom, Rose, shalom, shalom, shalom...." Her eyes closed again, and I continued to whisper in her ear the word shalom until her last breath.

Shalom, more than peace, it is wholeness, being at one, with ourselves, with others, with God, with life in all of its mysteries and seasons. There are times when life is unfair, and makes no sense at all, and yet we try to see through to its beauty, not in the moment when our heart is breaking, but when able to step back, held in the arms of others, sprinkled with the dew of God's love and comfort, tears that mingle with our own. At my mother's funeral, I heard read for the first time a passage from "Peace of Mind," a book by Rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman, some sixty years ago the rabbi of Temple Israel, just down the Riverway from here:

Some children of earth are privileged to spend a long and sunlit day in the garden of the earth. For others the day is shorter, cloudier, and dusk descends more quickly as in a winter's tale. But whether our life is a long summery day or a shorter wintry afternoon, we know that inevitably there are storms and squalls which overcast even the bluest heaven and there are sunlit rays

which pierce the darkest autumn sky. The day that we are privileged to spend in the great park of life is not the same for all human beings, but there is enough beauty and joy and gaiety in the hours if we will but treasure them. Then for each one of us the moment comes when the great nurse, death, takes us, the child, by the hand and quietly says, "It is time to go home. Night is coming. It is your bedtime, child of earth. Come; you're tired. Lie down at last in the quiet nursery of nature and sleep. Sleep well. The day is gone. Stars shine in the canopy of eternity."

And then Rabbi Liebman, who himself died quite young, reflects on his own words: *The presence of death makes more meaningful all of the values of life. It is the teacher making us aware of the fragility and the nobility of the human dream.*

It is our ability to dream and look beyond the moment, even if at times we would rather not, that makes our impermanence so different from that of all the rest of nature. At times it is indeed "a pity that we don't know what the little flowers know." But only we can know the intimations of meaning in the turning of seasons, whether of spring to summer or fall to winter. There is meaning in every season of life that waits to teach us if we are willing. At times, meaning comes as but an intimation, and at other times with the bright sunshine of certainty, at times as an unsought gift, at other times the fruit of arduous seeking.

It is perhaps most of all, our ability to make a difference in the time we have that distinguishes the nature of our impermanence. We can show and receive kindness, making the world around us a more caring and gentle place, our mark softly left in time as the beauty of a snowflake that does not melt. We soothe the world itself and the suffering of people, seeking to end war and strife, finding meaning in our part in removing all that denies the meaning and purpose of our time on earth. Not theatre of the absurd, we each have a precious part to play in the drama of life. We live with the knowledge that we are part of something much greater than ourselves. Though our own time may be short, we are part of a cooperative endeavor that is the human race, passing our baton to the next runner when the time comes. It is our impermanence and awareness of the finite span of our own days that can be the inspiration to fill the time we have with meaning, to make a difference.

On the day the wrens flew away, a mourning dove appeared, perched on the edge of the garage roof, just above the now vacant bird house. We had never seen a mourning dove in the garden before. Her gentle song filled the air, haunting in its simple beauty, both hollow and full, of longing and hope so fragile and so fine. On occasion we still hear the song of the wrens. At times I think they are surely here, in all the brightness of a summer's afternoon. We pause to listen as we once did, and even if at times with tears to receive with gratitude the blessings of impermanence.