

Turn Away from Oppression

The Sefat Emet teaches that the reason that Sukkot comes so soon after Yom Kippur is that Yom Kippur is about change. Change is about moving from where we have been to a place where we have not been. Sukkot is about moving – out of our homes, out of our zones of comfort, to confront the ways in which changing is both necessary and makes us vulnerable.

During Sukkot, the Season of our Rejoicing, it is customary to read the Megillah known as Qohelet – Ecclesiastes – perhaps the least joyful (with the possible exception of Job) of any of the biblical books.

Pete Seeger found inspiration in it, though, and Judith has graced us with a lovely rendition – sans the electronic backup of the Byrds. There is a YouTube clip of a much older Pete Seeger – he seems to be standing in front of the White House, protesting something, no doubt – recalling how he came to write this song. His publisher asked him for another song like “Good Night, Irene,” because he couldn’t sell all those “protest songs.” Pete says, “That made me angry,” but he pulled out a poem he had in his pocket. Apparently, he had been carrying around verses from the third chapter of Qohelet, to which he added the last line, “A time for peace – I swear it’s not too late” (which, of course, did make it a kind of protest song). And he added the refrain, “Turn, turn turn.” “I sang it around,” he said, and didn’t expect much of anything to come of it. Then these young guys picked it up and added a beat – The Byrds took it to Number 1. Judy Collins sang it, everyone sang it.

But I want to talk more about the word he added: Turn. The word actually is there in the text, though I don’t think Pete knew it at the time. Perhaps he was thinking of chapter 1, in which the wind turns and turns. There the verb is *sovev* – like a spinning top (a *s’vivon*, a dreidl). The kind of turning we’ve been reflecting on for the past month and a half is a different word: *shuv*, as in *teshuvah*. The word is there, but maybe not where we expect it.

Chapter 3, Pete’s chapter, ends with the statement, “I saw that there is nothing better for man than to enjoy his possessions, since that is his portion. For who can enable him to see what will happen afterward?”

The next line, which begins chapter 4, starts with a word that our English translation (NJPS) renders “I further observed...” The Hebrew word is “*shavti*” – I turned. “*Shavti ani va’er’eh...*” “I turned around and saw” – that seems a little different than just saying “I further observed...” I saw something else that made me turn my head, that made me see things differently, that made me change my opinion. The Spanish

commentator Ibn Ezra – sometimes a little more down-to-earth and a little more skeptical than the others – has an interesting comment that picks up on the gesture of turning:

Shavti. Like saying, *hazarti bi v'shavti* – [which has echoes of returning in *teshuvah*, *hazarah bit'shuvah*] – I turned away from this notion, that I thought that what is good for a person is to be happy, because it is not possible to rejoice [fully] because there is in the world violence, and it will take from him by force, and there will be oppression that will oppress him, [for a] king or a judge can accept a bribe, a can steal. For the verse explains that there is might in the hands of oppressors...”

Indeed, chapter 4 opens with that thought: “I turned and noticed all the oppression that goes on under the sun: the tears of the oppressed, with none to comfort them; and the power of their oppressors—none to comfort them.”

And this brings us to an extraordinary midrash. After various rabbis weigh in with their opinions on just what oppression is being referred to here, Daniel the Tailor speaks up. We know nothing about him. The *Encyclopedia Judaica* identifies him as a rabbi, but I prefer to think of him as just a guy, a just guy, who is aware of a particular oppression carried out in the name of the Torah itself:

“.... It refers to *mamzerim* (those considered to be of illegitimate birth)... Now what wrong has such a person done? A man has illicit intercourse and begets this child; how has the latter sinned and how is he responsible?”¹

Our friend Rabbi Steven Greenberg in his important book, *Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition*,² cites the version of this midrash³ in which the “hands of their oppressors” is specified by Daniel as being those of the Great Sanhedrin, the High Court of Israel,

which moves against them with the authority of the Torah and removes them from the community because it is written: “A *mamzer* shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord” (Deut. 23:3).

And there is no one to comfort them – Therefore, says the Holy One of blessing: “It is upon Me to comfort them.” In this world there are unworthy ones among them, but regarding the times of the Messiah, Zechariah prophesied: “Behold I see them all like pure gold”...

¹ Qohelet Rabbah, IV, 1.

² University of Wisconsin Press, 2004, pp. 211-14.

³ Lev.R. XXXII,8.

The midrash does not work it out fully, but Rabbi Greenberg hears the voice of Daniel the Tailor as a voice demanding prophetic justice:

Daniel the Tailor faults neither the law nor God. The law of the *mamzer* might well be taken as a useful protection of the family. However, the Sanhedrin failed to balance this value against the general biblical concern for justice and fairness. Even worse, the Sanhedrin, it would appear, rests easy with the sacrifice of the happiness of the bastard to a greater good. Whatever they decide to do about the problem, Daniel cannot bear their resting easy. He wants the rabbis to experience the human implications of their power.⁴

For Greenberg, of course, this also has implications for the halachic treatment of gay and lesbian Jews. Those who have been excluded by means of a narrow reading of a single verse will come to be included. But the even larger point is that we may never rest easy. Every verse of Scripture, every court ruling, every vote an individual casts in a democracy, has implications and effects that reach far beyond the verse or the ruling or the ballot that is cast. In an imperfect world, we must make choices, but that is never the end of the story. The pious *poseurs* of any tradition who insist, “The Bible says X, and that is the end of the story” do not speak for God. A verse is never the end of the story.

Anyone can quote a verse of Scripture. Let me quote the one that says, “There is nothing better for a person than to enjoy her possessions...” Shall I say that that is the end of the story? Qohelet said it, but that is not the end of the story even for him, for immediately he turns, and in turning he notices something else: the possessions in which I take such pleasure come at a cost. Perhaps it is not quite as extreme as the lesson the step-grandfather gives the young Stuart in Tony Kushner’s *Caroline, or Change*. I’m giving you this twenty-dollar bill, but you must know that the only reason you have it is because someone else does not have it. You have taken it away from someone else. Or maybe it is that extreme, maybe that is the truth of the matter.

The good life means never to rest content, always to turn, turn, turn, always to notice the oppressions that take place under the sun. The wind spins around, but does not notice. It is we who can stop spinning long enough to turn and to look – *shavti va'er'eh* -- to notice, to protest. It is we who can move to a new place. It is we who can comfort the oppressed by protesting the ease with which some benefit from that oppression. Turn, turn, turn.

⁴ Greenberg, p. 212.