

## ***The Song of Redemption***

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On Thursday night, Jennifer, Sibby, Rabbi Sager and I went to hear Paul Simon at DPAC. It was an overwhelming experience. The nostalgia in the room. The pulse of a group of musicians who come together and become more than the sum of their parts. Even from the 2<sup>nd</sup> balcony, the awe of being in the room with the man whose recordings were so much a part of my childhood, so much a part of American life, and the lives of so many people in the room that night, to look down and see his mouth move and hear the words and the tone and the melodies I knew so well, all of it reminded me of the power and life of live music.

The tour is called “So Beautiful or So What,” named after Paul Simon’s new album. A few weeks ago I went onto I-Tunes to buy a copy but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. I bought The Essential Paul Simon – a collection of Simon and Garfunkle concert recordings instead. I imagine I am not alone when I confess that, at DPAC, I listened patiently as Simon played a few of the new songs but they were not what I came to hear. What I enjoyed was when he played Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes, The Boy in the Bubble and Graceland, and what I really *really* enjoyed was when he played the Sounds of Silence and The Only Living Boy in New York, and Hearts and Bones and 50 Ways to Leave Your Lover.

One might think it should be different. Maybe we should have been upset that so much of the concert was devoted to things we have all heard so many times before? Simon is touring, after all, to promote his new album, but he and we know that is not why people come; we come to sing what is old, to remember and relive what know, to mark time through song.

I am asked sometimes why we read the same stories year after year, and I was reminded again the other night how when we repeat stories and lyrics and songs, they become a mirror; when the songs don’t change, we can better understand how much we have.

This week’s parsha is Va’yetze – it begins with a familiar story: Jacob leaves his home, comes upon a place, places a stone at his head, dreams of a ladder with angels ascending and descending, awakens and declares, “God was in this place and I, I did not know.” But this story, for me, will forever be associated with something different: it was four years ago on Shabbat Vayetze, that I spent Shabbat in the hospital and held the hand of my dear friend, Joel, as he left the world. Rashi’s comment on the first verse of the parsha – that the Torah includes the detail that Jacob left Beer Sheva to tell us that when a great man leaves a place, it makes an impression – that comment will forever be bound up in my heart as the Torah I shared at Joel’s funeral two days later. I said Joel’s departure from the world made an impression in my life I would never forget. We value what is new, what is shiny, change. But there is something to be said for repeating what came before, for old stories which remind us of the passage of time, and what is most important.

With that said, I want to add a new teaching from this week’s parsha through which I can remember Joel. It begins not with the story of Jacob, but with the story of Leah. Leah is “snu’ah” – a term that some scholars say is a technical term to describe an un-favored co-wife, but it is also an emotional term: it means she is hated. “Jacob loved Rachel” (Genesis 29:18), he works seven years for her and, when those years are up, he says to Lavan quite brazenly, “Give me my wife, for my time is done, and let me come to bed with her,” but “when morning came, look, she was Leah” (Genesis 29:29). Jacob was deceived and, even though just a week later, he marries Rachel too, the Torah tells us in verse 30, “Indeed [Jacob] loved Rachel more than Leah. And when God saw that Leah was hated, He opened her womb...”

Why Leah was hated is a topic for another time. Suffice it to say I think it had nothing to do with Leah, but rather with what Jacob hated about himself. When Jacob confronts Lavan as to why he deceived him, Lavan says, “It is not done thus in our place, to give the younger girl before the firstborn.” Lavan reminds Jacob how, through deception, he put himself – a younger child – before his elder brother, Esau. Just as Jacob used the cover of darkness to deceive his father, now Jacob is now deceived in darkness.

Through no fault of her own, Leah reminds Jacob of a part of himself – his dishonesty – he hates, but rather than hate himself, he takes out his own self-loathing on Leah.

What I want to focus on is, “What does Leah do with her pain?” She has sons. When she has Reuben, in naming him, she says, “Yes, the Lord has seen my suffering, for now my husband will love me.” She hopes Reuben can make Jacob love her. Then she names Shimon, from Sh’ma, to hear, and says, “Yes, Adonai has *heard* I was despised and has given me this one too.” According to biblical scholar, Robert Alter: “Leah’s illusion that bearing a son would bring her Jacob’s love has been painfully disabused, for here, she herself proclaims that she is “despised” and that God has given her another son as compensation.” Then she has a 3<sup>rd</sup> son and names him Levi saying, “This time at last my husband will join me” – the verb for “to accompany” is *l’laveh*, from which we get the name, Levi. And then she has a 4<sup>th</sup> son and names him Yehuda saying, “This time I sing praise to Adonai.” About this last name, Alter writes: “With the birth of her fourth son, she no longer expresses hope of winning her husband’s affection but instead simply gives thanks to God for granting her male offspring.” In the margin next to Alter’s comment, I wrote, “to be a Jew is to give thanks to God with no ulterior motive, no hope or expectation of anything in return or that anything will change. It is to be grateful for life as it is.

Leah goes through a process of trying to make Jacob love her with Reuben, her first born, of coming to understand that she will always be hated and seeing Shimon as God’s compensation for her predicament, of hoping/trying again for Jacob’s love with Levi, and of final acceptance and even gratitude and praise, through Yehuda, the tribe from whom the Jewish people get our name: we are Jews from the tribe of Judah.

To be a Jew is to inherit Leah’s journey, to feel within oneself the sting of being other, even of being unloved, to struggle, to hope, but in the end, to sing, and give thanks even, perhaps especially, when life turns out differently than we hoped it would.

I realized as I listened to Paul Simon start to play and tears rolled down my face that Thursday was the first time in 4 years I had been to a concert. The last time was when I heard James Taylor at the Wiltern Theater in Los Angeles in February 2007. Joel and his wife, Heather, and Jennifer and I had tickets to go together, but Joel was at Cedars Sinai hospital undergoing treatment, so Heather and Jennifer and I went, and Heather called Joel from the concert and listened to the concert through Heather’s cell phone.

Like Leah, Joel struggled and hoped and questioned; he might even have felt hated by God in some moments because of the leukemia that was ravaging his body, but Joel’s lasting legacy is not loss: it is the gift of song and praise and thanks even after all hope was gone. Joel’s songs drew from a well of deep joy – a joy that knows not every question is answered, that knows pain, yet manages to weave harmonies and love from darkness. It is for this reason, I believe, that from Leah descends Judah, and from Judah’s line comes King David, and from King David comes the Messiah. Leah’s song is the song of the messiah’s redemption. That is the song I learned from Joel four years ago. Last Thursday in the music of Paul Simon, I was reminded again just how the song goes, and felt healed to sing along.