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Shabbat Beha'alotecha 5781

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LIKE A ROLLING STONE

Bob Dylan's 80th Birthday Sermon #1

It begins with the drum shot heard 'round the world: a mighty *thwack*, followed a split-second later by the reverb of the kick-drum, a one-two punch that Bruce Springsteen recalled this way in 1989, twenty-four years after Columbia Records released "Like a Rolling Stone":

I was in the car with my mother listening to WMCA, and on came that snare shot that sounded like somebody'd kicked open the door to your mind.

The door to my mind got kicked open, it must have been, around 1983 —when, rifling through my parents' vinyl—as I often did after school —I stopped on the one with the cover photo of the surly 24-year-old with the rat's nest haircut. I slipped the record from its well-worn cardboard sleeve, lifted the lid off the walnut cabinet on the old KLH, turned the volume up, unlatched the needle, and let it rip—

Wham! What a sound. After the drum shot comes this fantastic cacophony of organ and bass and electric guitar, and then that unmistakable adenoidal sneer, declaiming in a cadence that could only be described as mythical (I mean, it begins with "once upon a time," for crying out loud):

Once upon a time

*You dressed so fine
Threw the bums a dime
In your prime
Didn't you?*

And nothing would ever be the same again.

This Monday, Bob Dylan celebrated his 80th birthday. It should be clear by now that I'm a fan. Maybe not as big a fan as my buddy Rabbi Seth Limmer of Chicago Sinai Congregation, who, last Shabbat, delivered a sermon in celebration of Dylan's milestone, in which he referenced the **sixteen** times he's seen Dylan live, annotating each performance with extensive footnotes. As for me, I've only seen the Man in concert a measly eight times, and I forget most of the details, which I think, by the way, may be a sign that you've *really* been at a Dylan concert.

The other sign of really being at a Dylan concert is that you have no idea what he's singing. Limmer and I concur that the friends we've taken to see Dylan who have failed to appreciate the experience mainly share the same critique: they can't tell what song he's playing. And we both know people whose main complaint is that they don't like his voice anymore, if they ever did in the first place. But I'm with what Bob once said on this issue: "I'm like Enrico Caruso... if you listen closely, I hit all the right notes."

The way I see it, the voice is a lot like anchovies. Either you think they taste delicious or you don't, but—and I don't care what you say here—a salad isn't a Caesar without them.

In any case: Love him or hate him, I have publicly committed to celebrating Dylan's 80th with a year's worth of remarks on "The Torah of Bob," so tonight, for the first such sermon in this cycle, let's bring it all back home, back to

*Once upon a time
You dressed so fine
Threw the bums a dime
In your prime
Didn't you?*

It's important to understand that when "Like a Rolling Stone" came out, on July 20th, 1965, nothing in popular music had ever sounded like this.

Columbia Records was unhappy with everything about it—starting with its six-minute length, which was more than double what passed for a pop song back then (but which, to Dylan's credit as an editor of his own muse, began its life as what he described as "this long piece of vomit about twenty pages long").

They also hated its electrified sound. (At his infamous Newport Folk Festival performance just five days after the record came out, Dylan doubled down by plugging in and playing the second set extremely loud.)

And the record execs were none too thrilled with the song's confrontational tone and message. No one was used to hearing a song on the radio that so vindictively accused the listener.

Like this:

*...nobody has ever taught you how to live on the street
And now you find out you're gonna have to get used to it*

Or this:

*When you ain't got nothing, you got nothing to lose
You're invisible now, you got no secrets to conceal*

And this:

*You used to laugh about
Everybody that was hangin' out
Now you don't talk so loud
Now you don't seem so proud
About having to be scrounging for your next meal*

And most definitely this:

*How does it feel
How does it feel
To be without a home
Like a complete unknown
Like a rolling stone?*

The whole song is one long withering indictment, a verse-chorus-verse takedown of entitlement and privilege and the hypocrisy of the well-to-do, the ones who've "gone to the finest schools...", all "drinkin', thinkin' that they've got it made / exchanging all precious gifts / But you'd better take

your diamond ring, you'd better pawn it babe," Dylan heckles, his voice dripping with contempt.

Even the so-called "protest songs" of Dylan's early folk period never came close to this. Long gone is "*the answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind / the answer is blowing in the wind.*" No, now — Dylan seems to be shouting — the answer is blowing in your face, and you are most certainly not "my friend."

Where does a song like this come from? How might we appreciate its power?

There's a wonderful, disturbing, and truly bizarre episode in this week's Torah portion, *Beha'alotcha* from the Book of Numbers, that sheds light on Dylan's work, his art in general, and "Like a Rolling Stone," specifically.

Let me set the scene. While wandering in the wilderness, the Israelites periodically stop, make camp, and set up the Tent of Meeting where the leadership would encounter God and await direction.

Moses has charged seventy elders of the community as his official "cabinet," if you will, and God has even imbued these 70 officials with some of Moses's own prophetic ability. The Torah tells us that, even as Moses could communicate the very word of God to the people, so did God draw from the Divine spirit that rested upon Moses, and conferred it upon the elders. When touched by the Divine *ruach*, God's "wind" or "spirit," the elders became prophets — like Moses, they could speak God-talk, or something like that, but they appear to have kept their mouths shut.

All of a sudden there's a commotion in the Israelite camp. A youth has discovered two men, apparently registered officials as well, who have not joined the official cabinet of elders-turned-prophets. These two men, Eldad and Medad by name, begin to "speak in ecstasy" — they begin to issue forth prophecy.

What exactly were they doing? Speaking in tongues? Channeling some kind of Divine message without Moses's direct authorization, and outside the company of their recently commissioned comrades? We will never know, but the young man who sees and hears them reacts with distress. He runs to Moses and, out of breath, exclaims, "Eldad and Medad are acting like Prophets in the camp!" And Joshua, Moses's right-hand-man (and eventual successor), is so unnerved that he demands, "My lord Moses, lock them up!"

But Moses replies, "Why are you acting like such a zealot on my behalf? If it were up to me, all the people would be prophets of God, with the Divine Spirit conferred upon them!" (Numbers 11:24-29)

There's a conventional view of prophecy in the Jewish tradition, that God bestowed it upon a select group of Biblical folks — among them preeminent figures like Moses and Samuel and Elijah, as well as three "major prophets," Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, twelve so-called "minor prophets," including guys like Amos and Hosea and Malachi, and even a handful of prophetesses such as Miriam and Deborah — and then, after a time, specifically, after the destruction of the Temple in 586, followed by the Babylonian exile, prophecy ceased. (It is probably no coincidence that prophecy is said to have ended at exactly the time that the religious officials in charge of the 2nd Temple, after

the Exile, wanted to shore up their own authority as the official spokesmen for God.)

Centuries later, the Rabbis, the Master Teachers of the Tradition, upheld this view — that prophecy declined and eventually ended — again, not inconveniently for the sake of their own religious authority.

I'm of the other view — the less conventional view — the view of Moses about those two fellas prophesying by themselves in the camp: “Would that **all** the people were prophets, with the Divine Spirit upon them.” I'm actually of the mind that any of us could be a Prophet, and most of us in fact *are* prophets, imbued with Divine spirit; it's just that we don't know it.

This last point — our not knowing it — is where Bob Dylan may **not** be like most of us. Now, to be clear, Dylan himself has never gone on record claiming to be a prophet. But he's never exactly **denied** the allegation, either. In fact, on his most recent album, the brilliant *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, which came out last summer, fifty-five years after “Like a Rolling Stone,” he sings with a wink and a nod in exactly this direction.

It's a dirge-like blues called *False Prophet* and it starts like this:

*Another day that don't end - another ship going out
Another day of anger - bitterness and doubt
I know how it happened - I saw it begin
I opened my heart to the world and the world came in*

And then he growls:

*I'm the enemy of treason - the enemy of strife
I'm the enemy of the un-lived meaningless life
I ain't no false prophet - I just know what I know
I go where only the lonely can go.*

Okay, so he won't cop to being a full-on Moses, but Dylan "ain't no false prophet," either.

It's not just this song. And it's not just "Like a Rolling Stone," either, which, in its uncompromising, take-no-prisoners attitude, resembles nothing so much as the Biblical Prophets, who, more than fortune-tellers, were the great Social Critics of their time: impugning the rich who ignored the poor while making a great show of their public piety and their gifts to the religious establishment; impugning the priests who preached God's unity while indulging in idol worship; impugning the officials who broke faith with the Torah while clothing themselves in the mantle of Jewish authority. Pardon the anachronism, but if that isn't Dylan-esque, I don't know what is.

You say that sometimes Dylan's lyrics sound like surrealistic gibberish? Same goes for the Prophets, as anyone who's tried to learn a Haftarah portion will report. When he set out to write "Like a Rolling Stone," Dylan recalls that the song came to him as a blast of sound and fury. "It wasn't called anything," he once said, "just a rhythm thing on paper all about my steady hatred directed at some point that was honest."

And if that ain't prophecy, I don't know what it is.

Every other voice Dylan has taken on throughout his career of six decades also finds its echo in the Biblical Prophets.

There are the countless references to the Bible itself, warped and repurposed, but with the Biblical dialect intact - the “hard rain” of Noah’s Flood now visualized as nuclear fallout; Isaiah’s watchmen stationed “all along the watchtower”; “the first ones now will later be last”; “I can see the Master’s hand / in every leaf that trembles, in every grain of sand.”

There’s also the Questioning Prophet:

“Something is happening here / and you don’t know what it is / do you, Mr. Jones?”

And

“How many roads must a man walk down before they call him a man?”

There’s the Wounded Prophet, like the Biblical Hosea, ripping apart a faithless lover:

“You just kind of wasted my precious time / But don’t think twice, it’s alright.”

And there’s the Comforting Prophet, invoking the Biblical Jacob, no less:

“May you build a ladder to the stars / And climb on every rung / And may you stay / Forever young.”

My friends, there's another word for Prophecy—when the Divine comes to touch a human being—and it's called **Inspiration**, from the Latin "*spiritus*" meaning "spirit" or "breath."

As Dylan puts it: "I opened my heart to the world and the world came in."

I believe we **all** have this ability, to open our heart to the world and let the world come in—to let God's spirit enter our consciousness—to move us, guide us, transform us.

We **all** have the capacity for Inspiration: to receive the spirit, the muse, that "rhythm thing," and to transform it into Art.

I agree with Moses: "Would that **all** the people were prophets, with the Divine Spirit upon them."

Are you open to Inspiration?

How does it feel?