

Simple Gifts
Rabbi Ayelet S. Cohen
West End Synagogue
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This summer we took the kids to visit the Shaker Village in Hancock, MA. I didn't think much about it beyond that it seemed like a good way to spend a summer afternoon, and that I'd heard they had great activities for kids, where they could dress up in traditional costumes, watch a blacksmith at work, weave on a real loom and pretend to milk a cow.

It was a beautiful summer day, and it was an unusual pleasure to have the spaciousness of time to roam the grounds, explore the buildings, and spend as much (or as little) time as we wanted in any particular spot. But I actually found it quite moving looking at the beautiful, meticulously crafted buildings and the clear intentionality with which the Shakers lived their lives. Their motto was "hands to work, hearts to God." They lived simply but cared deeply about creating beautiful, functional objects that lasted. It's the opposite of the brightly colored plastic toys made under terrible conditions in Chinese factories that so often break after one or two uses. We toss them away, knowing how replaceable they are. They made everything with intention. They saw this all as part of their divine service or as we would say: *avodah*.

The Shakers' religious structure was totally egalitarian, with men and women serving equal and parallel, although totally separate roles. They unequivocally condemned slavery by 1817, refusing to admit converts unless they signed a document freeing any slaves, admitting former slaves as equal members, and even buying slaves to set them free. In a society with no social safety net, they adopted orphaned children, raising them in the embrace of the community and providing education for girls as well as boys.

Originally offshoot of the Quaker Church in mid 18th century England, Shaker worship services began similarly, in quiet meditation, but then they would sing and dance, or tremble. Mainstream Protestants, accustomed to quiet, dignified prayer called them, derisively, the "Shaking Quakers" or Shakers. After suspicion and contempt exploded into violence and imprisonment, church leader Mother Ann Lee, along with eight Shakers fled England in 1774 in search of the promise of religious freedom in the new America.

Of course, as we know, that promise has been hard to fulfill. American Protestants also found the Shakers' spirited prayer practices, militant celibacy and missionary zeal alarming. That the Shakers came from England and were pacifists did not further endear them to Revolutionary Americans. Throughout New England, Shakers were brutally persecuted, imprisoned, and run out of town, often with local authorities leading the charge.

That dynamic has been repeated more often than I can count in this country—too many who fought to immigrate here to preserve their own religious freedom or escape persecution or war or crushing poverty want the door to open just wide enough for them to enter, and then to shut it firmly behind them. Newcomers are greeted with suspicion and judgement, and deep fear that they will change the way of life, the national culture, however new, that has become familiar.

Eventually the Shakers settled into carefully constructed villages, where they lived and worked and worshiped until eventually their numbers dwindled to almost nothing.

So there we are in the Shaker meeting house. And as is want to happen when two rabbis and their three small children visit a Shaker village with the month of Elul and the High Holidays approaching, it occurred to me that the Shakers were the “*chassidim*” to the Protestant “*mitnagdim*.” Their daily lives were austere but their prayer lives were ecstatic. The rationalist intellectuals totally rejected the chassidim's ecstatic prayer practice and their personal yearning for God. It seemed undisciplined and messy and extraneous. It made no sense to them.

As a descendant of Litvaks, I totally relate to this. But my other grandfather descended from the *choze m' Lublin*, the Seer of Lublin, a visionary chassidic master. And sometimes, I must admit, I also like to sing and dance.

In the meeting house, our guide tried to illustrate Shaker prayer life for us by singing hymns and showing us the choreographed prayer dances. She led the tourists in some awkward dances as their teenage kids slumped in the pews and mostly looked humiliated. To conclude she handed out copies of the Shaker hymn *Simple Gifts*, a song I had heard a million times without paying much attention, that for me mostly resonated as the refrain from Aaron Copland's *Appalachian Spring*.

It turns out that Copland, another descendant of immigrant Litvacks—his father was Kaplan when he left Lithuania in the 1870s—may have discovered the hymn

not far from where we were, at the Lenox, MA library while he was at Tanglewood in the summer of 1940.

Think about it. Aaron Copland, the gay son of Russian/Lithuanian Jewish immigrants to Brooklyn, wrote this quintessentially American anthem, based on a Shaker hymn. What is more American than that?

Born in 1900, Copland grew up in middle class Brooklyn, the youngest of five siblings. His parents were on the early end of Russian Jewish immigration, so Copland grew up among German Jews, and Irish, Italian and German immigrants. He celebrated his bar mitzvah at what is now known as Kane Street Synagogue in Brooklyn. There is no question that the religious music of his childhood left a deep imprint on him that is evident in numerous works. In fact, some early critics wondered if his music was too “Hebraic” to be considered truly American.

Copland wasn’t religious as an adult. In fact, his friend Leonard Bernstein teased him for not being “as Jewish” as he was. But Copland did not attempt to erase his Jewish identity. In fact, I think you could make the case that he was a Reconstructionist. Referring to the sense of one’s self in the universe: “And isn’t that religion,” he asked, “...the connection with something larger than yourself?”¹

Aaron Copland had a strong sense of himself as an American composer, an identity his immigrant parents had secured for him through their journeys. Like many other liberal intellectuals, he came under suspicion during the McCarthy era, leading to *Lincoln Portrait* being dropped from the program at President Eisenhower’s 1954 inauguration. His response was this:

“In a Brooklyn Public School I was taught to believe that an American took pride in his right to speak his mind on controversial subjects, event to protest when some action seemed unworthy of our great democratic traditions. In doing precisely that, I believe I was doing my civic duty, keeping alive the finest of American traditions. Having been encouraged to speak openly as a free American, it now appears that I am in danger of being penalized for so doing.”²

It wasn’t long before he was called to testify at the House Committee for Unamerican Activities.

¹ Arnold Dobrin, from Aaron Copland, the Life and Work of an Uncommon Man, Howard Pollack, p. 28

² Pollack, p. 453

Copland himself preferred to live simply. Even once he had moved out of the poverty of his early life as a composer, he dressed much more plainly than many in his circle of creative friends, spending money cautiously, although he was generous with friends and family. Emotionally he was also very measured, saving his passion for his music. “I adore extravagance, he said once, but I abhor waste.”

So perhaps it wasn't surprising that he was drawn to the Shakers. During the Depression many artists became intrigued by the Shakers, so long the objects of ridicule and persecution, perhaps searching for an American utopia unaffected by the vicissitudes of economics and politics.

Simple Gifts had been published in 1940 in a book on Shaker music and dance.³ But it was Copland's orchestration for the 1944 Martha Graham ballet that brought the song into the American consciousness. The soaring score has become one of the iconic soundtracks of the American imagination. Its sweetness calls to mind the best of this country: not a melting pot where identity is lost, but an orchestra where you can listen for the sound of each instrument which collectively create something wholly new and infinitely more beautiful. How perfect that this music was created by the gay Jewish child of immigrants based on a song by a persecuted religious minority. How truly American.

Thanks to Aaron Copland, *Simple Gifts* became embedded in the American songbook even as the Shakers were fading out. Artists from Judy Collins to REM to Yo Yo Ma have performed and recorded it; it was incorporated into *Air and Simple Gifts*, arranged by John Williams for President Obama's first inauguration.

The hymn was written by Elder Joseph Brackett in 1848 at the Shaker community in Alfred, Maine:

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.
When true simplicity is gained,
To bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed,

³ Edward Andrews

To turn, turn will be our delight,
Till by turning, turning we come 'round right.

It was a dancing song, sometimes called a “Quick Dance,” and the lyrics “To turn, turn will be our delight/Till by turning, turning we come 'round right” were actually dance instructions. But my Litvak mind went right to *tshuvah*.

If you reframe this Shaker hymn in the context of Yom Kippur, the simplicity is all about stripping down to the basics. That’s what today is all about. If we are fully present in this day and its practice—no phones, no email, no status updates, nowhere else we need to be, abstaining from all of the daily little luxuries and distractions—what might we notice?

Whether you are fasting all day or eating as simply as you need to stay healthy, whether or not you left your leather shoes at home, whatever you are doing to take on a practice for all or even a part of this day, the point of it is to pare down to the essentials. To keep things simple.

We know we are here together for the next six hours or so, or if you don’t have that long, be fully here for as long as you are in this space. And for the rest of that time, our shoes and our clothes and our next meal and our next lovemaking are off the table. It doesn’t matter what anyone else has, it doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks. This time is for each one of us. To simply be present. To strip away the distractions and the armor. To simply be ourselves at our most real. If you can do that, you might feel a little more free. It is the gift of this day.

“When true simplicity is gained/To bow and to bend we will not be ashamed.” The Shakers were accustomed to their worship being ridiculed. As Jews in this country we are enjoying a period of tremendous safety and privilege. And yet we read words in the *machzor* that were written by Jews in other times who prayed knowing simply their expression of faith put them at risk of death at the hands of the Romans, or the Crusaders, or the Inquisition, or the Nazis.

And now, many American Jews are too ashamed of claiming Jewish particularism or white privilege to hold their Jewish identities and so we erase our Jewishness ourselves.

Meanwhile, Muslims are being threatened and their American identity is daily called into question.

Tomorrow we will get back to the work of making sure this country remains safe for all of its inhabitants. That it honors the contributions of all of its immigrants as well as its native population and ensures their freedom and civil rights. That its doors stay open to all those who need to enter. To notice our fear, and keep the doors open anyway. New instruments in the orchestra will change the music, for sure, but the music will be more resonant for it.

But today, whether whether it's your custom to "bow and to bend" and fully prostrate on Yom Kippur or to pray or reflect in other ways, do it fully. Let's let go of wondering about or fearing what the person sitting next to you or behind you is thinking, and be fully in our own personal experience of this day. Be the Jew you need to be today. Whatever that looks like. Discern your own voice, your own instrument, and sound it out with pride.

"To turn, turn will be our delight/Till by turning, turning we come 'round right." Or to put it another way, "*hashiveinu Adonai eleicha venashuva, chadesh yameinu kekedem*— Return us, Holy One. Turn us to you and we shall return, renew our days as of old."

There is often a lot of heaviness associated with Yom Kippur, the intensity of staring at our true selves in the mirror, of really asking how we want to live, of confronting our mortality, of trying to face some of our most broken relationships. But today can actually be considered to be the happiest day of the year. If we do it. For real. If we really do *tshuvah* and repair all that we can, if we know we tried as much as we could to peel away distractions and focus on what is essential, it feels amazing. And that first taste of honey cake or challah tonight will be sweeter even than it tasted on Rosh Hashanah.

We're great at over complicating things. Because this world is really complicated. And everything that happens has layers and layers—what it looks like on the surface. What is *really* going on. We need to train ourselves to peel back the optics and look at how sex and gender and race and religion and class and national origin and power dynamics all play in to what is going on. We need to train ourselves to listen, so we can begin to hear each instrument within the orchestra, to understand what harmony each one brings and what would be lost if this country had just one solo voice drowning out all the others. We need to use this time to learn how to use our own instrument, to practice sounding it out.

Hashiveinu Adonai eleicha venashuva. Return us, Holy One. Turn us to you and we shall return. It's too much to do alone. We need help turning. In order to turn and return we need to dance with the divine, to find what is holy within ourselves

and those we love, and to find what is holy within those who are very different from us. Only then can we return.

Tonight when we sound the shofar at the end of Neilah, our practice is to invite everyone who has a shofar to join in for that final blast. And everyone else listens as hard as we can. That symphony of shofar blasts and incredibly active listening is what will make sure our hearts stay open after the gates of Neilah are closed.

It is one last moment in this safe and simple and free space before we rejoin the noise of the world, so that tomorrow we can raise our voices to make beautiful music. So that even when the world is far from simple we remember what is important. What is essential. What is real. And we never stop working to make it more free.