

Woody, Isaiah, and Us
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You never know who your teachers are going to be, or from where you will learn the Torah you need to hear. Last summer in the Berkshires, my nephew Toby introduced me—all of our family actually—to an album, and one song in particular, that has become some of the most important Torah I have learned in the last few years. Toby was all of five at the time, so we heard the album about four hundred times, frequently at earsplitting volume. Like all Jews receiving prophecy, we were resistant.

We tried turning it off, we tried negotiating a maximum volume, we tried playing something else. But Toby was very insistent, and for our kids whatever he says, goes. So finally, we submitted. We listened to the album, called *Wonder Wheel*. It's an amazing album.

It's a collection of previously unrecorded songs by Woody Guthrie, whose centennial is being celebrated this year, set to music by the Klezmatics. You might think this an odd combination. Most of us think of Guthrie as the quintessentially American Dust Bowl troubadour who became the voice of labor and justice in American society. Politics aside, he seems culturally about as far as you can get from Klezmer. But we were surprised to discover that Woody Guthrie had a profound Brooklyn Jewish connection.

Woody Guthrie was born in Oklahoma just over a century ago—on July 14, 1912—to parents who instilled in him their love of folk music. He experienced profound tragedy early in life, including the traumatic death of his older sister and the institutionalization and eventual death of his mother, from what was not yet understood to be Huntington's Disease, the genetic disease which later would claim his own life.

As a young man Woody traveled the country. The Depression and the Great Dust Storm drew him west to California in hopes of supporting the family he left behind in Texas, painting signs and playing guitar in exchange for room and board. He encountered virulent prejudice against the "Okies" who flocked to California in search of work. Already something of a hero to the migrant workers and laborers who became his audience, Woody deeply related to the outsider identity, trying to give voice to those whose concerns were invisible and whose voices were ignored.

In 1940 he moved to New York, forming the folk group that later became the Weavers, singing songs of political protest and social activism. After the collapse of his first marriage, Woody married Marjorie (Greenblatt) Mazia, a dancer with the Martha Graham Dance Company. They had four children, including Arlo. Marjorie's mother, as it happened, was the Yiddish poet and labor activist Aliza Greenblatt.

Why am I telling you so much about Woody Guthrie? Because his story, despite—or perhaps because of—the fact he was born in rural Oklahoma, is quintessentially Jewish. It's a story about wandering, about feeling like an outsider, about experiencing tremendous loss and tragedy, and about fighting for justice. Woody Guthrie didn't use the tragedies of his life as an

excuse to let himself off the hook. Instead, he drew values from the adversity and heartbreak he experienced that shaped his life and impacted this world for the good.

The song I fell in love with is called *Gonna Get Through This World*. “I’m gonna get through this world the best I can, if I can,” Woody wrote. “I’m gonna get through this world the best I can. I’m gonna get through this world the best I can, if I can. And I think I can.”

I think the prophet Isaiah would have liked Woody Guthrie. In the haftarah we just heard, Isaiah is furious. He’s calling us out. Why are we doing this? Why are we fasting? Why are we here all day? It’s not that he’s telling us the rituals of Yom Kippur are meaningless. On the contrary, fasting and praying, stripping away the distractions of the every day is extremely important. The internal work is essential. The rituals can be transporting. But to what end?

If we turn too far inward we forget about our responsibility to the world around us. If we focus too much on the rituals and not about what they are aimed to achieve, we run the risk of missing the point, or worse, achieving the opposite. Isaiah rails against what he sees as a community that has become so distracted by ritual for its own sake that Yom Kippur becomes an exercise in self indulgence, a hollow show of piety. That is not the point, he rages. The fast that God wants is much harder than missing a few meals and a day of work.

“Is this the fast I desire,
A day for people to starve their bodies?
Is it bowing the head like a bulrush
And lying in sackcloth and ashes?
Do you call that a fast,
A day when the Eternal is favorable?
No, this is the fast I desire:
To unlock the fetters of wickedness,
And untie the cords of the yoke
To let the oppressed go free;
To break off every yoke.
It is to share your bread with the hungry,
And to take the wretched poor into your home;
When you see the naked, to clothe them,
And not to ignore your own family.”

This isn’t one of those City Harvest days where they ask you to skip lunch and donate the money you would have spent to feed people who are hungry. (And nine times out of ten we plan to do it, but we forget until after lunch, and then we resolve to donate the money anyway, but we forget to do that too.) This is the real deal. Solve it. Fix it. Make this world more just. The rest is window dressing, and God isn’t interested.

At first when I hear these words I want to take to the streets and change the world. But to be honest, that feeling is quickly replaced by the desire to get back into bed and hide under the covers. I know! I know this is what needs to happen, and this is what I need to do. I know it. But how? I can’t do it. The world is too broken. The need is too great. I don’t have the resources. I

don't have the power. I don't have the audience of Woody Guthrie and I don't have the direct line to God of Isaiah.

As if I wasn't feeling inadequate enough. I've spent these ten days of teshuvah acknowledging all of the ways in which I have fallen short. What am I supposed to do? I want to give more tzedakah, but I'm trying to figure out how to keep my family in Manhattan and pay for nursery school. I want to spend more time volunteering, but I have a full time job, and kids at home, and parents who aren't in the greatest of health. We could all chime in.

"I want to take to the streets, but my health isn't what it was, and my body is too tired to March on Washington."

"I want to raise my voice, but sometimes I'm scared to go public with an unpopular opinion. People can be so nasty, and I just can't bear it."

"I want to break off every yoke, but I've been looking for work for over a year and I'm worried about myself and my family and I'm running out of steam."

"I want to let the oppressed go free, but I'm spending all of the energy I have trying to save my marriage."

"I want to share my bread with the hungry, but this is New York. We can't actually take the poor into our homes. It's not safe."

Anyway, what is the most helpful? Direct service, community organizing for social transformation? I want to change the system, but I'm not sure anyone is listening, and in the meantime, I'm just trying to keep it together, but every Shabbat I walk by the same three homeless people on my way to shul with my kids. If we can't actually solve it, is anything we're doing worth it? Maybe it's all pointless.

This is where I am very grateful that Isaiah isn't the only voice in Jewish tradition. We need his voice, but we need other voices too—such as the equally essential but more gentle teaching of Rabbi Tarfon from Pirkei Avot, "לא עליך המלאכה לגמור ולא אתה בן חורין לבטל ממנה" "It is not your responsibility to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it. (Pirkei Avot 2:21) We can't do it all ourselves. We aren't supposed to. But neither are we free to wash our hands of it.

None of us is all that we want to be. Especially during these vulnerable days of awe, we know that. We are too overwhelmed, too busy, too scared, too sick, too worried about ourselves and the people we love. Part of the work of these ten days of tshuvah is forgiving ourselves for that. But it doesn't stop there. We aren't going to do it all ourselves. But neither do we have the right to walk away. Isaiah makes sure we hear that before we decide to be too easy on ourselves.

Woody Guthrie knew it. After World War II, he lived with his family in Coney Island, thriving as a songwriter. But he was never far from tragedy; his four year old daughter Cathy was killed in a house fire. By the late 1940s, Woody started to exhibit the erratic and violent behavior later diagnosed as the debilitating degenerative Huntington's Disease. He again left his family.

His condition continued to deteriorate and ultimately he was hospitalized, debilitated, for more than the last decade of his life. Woody Guthrie died on October 3, 1967.

Even as his body and his mind were fracturing in ways that must have been unimaginably terrifying, even as he endured crushing personal loss that many of us would not recover from, even as he caused enduring pain to his loved ones—he married and left three wives, three families—he kept writing the songs that would strengthen and inspire generations of activists.

The songs Woody Guthrie wrote while living in Coney Island express the profound influence of his exposure to Jewish life in Brooklyn through his mother-in-law Aliza Greenberg. They feel a little bit like Yiddish poetry, encompassing unbearable sadness, the remarkable ability to find beauty in the face of tragedy, and the resolve to create good in the world.

Woody and Marjorie Guthrie's youngest daughter, Nora, manages the Guthrie Archive, which includes the lyrics to thousands of songs that Woody never set to music or recorded. Nora heard the Klezmatics play some of her grandmother Aliza Greenberg's Yiddish songs at Tanglewood, and invited them to create the music for the songs Woody had written during his time in Coney Island. The result was the album *Wonder Wheel*, and the song *Gonna Get Through This World*.

Woody Guthrie was far from perfect, and never claimed to be. On the contrary, he was a deeply flawed human being. But thankfully, perfection is not a job requirement for prophecy. When I sing his words, I understand what Isaiah was trying to tell us in the Haftarah today. I hear in them the words of Pirkei Avot through the resolve of someone who remained hopeful and committed to the work of repairing the world despite all of the obstacles he faced and the terrible mistakes he made and in the face of great personal loss. It is not up to any one of us to finish the work, but we have to do the best we can. This is the fast that God desires.

*"I'm gonna get through this world as best I can, if I can,
And I think I can.
I'm gonna work in this world the best I can, if I can
And I think I can.
I'm gonna walk in this world the best I can, if I can
I'm gonna talk in this world the best I can
I'm gonna clean up this world the best I can, if I can
And I think I can.
I'm gonna leave this world behind the best I can, if I can
And I think I can.*

I think we can. G'mar chatimah tovah.

[Hear the Klezmatics perform "I'm Gonna Get Through This World:"
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gxcfgt8JBE4>]