

We Can't Be Waitin' On the Word to Change

Rabbi Barry M. Lutz, R.J.E.

Yom Kippur morning, 5768

It was quite a year wasn't it?

There was increasing unrest about the war, the administration scrambling to garner support, politicians tap dancing their way around previous positions, a growing environmental crises, economic concerns, even questioning of popular values and social ethics. And, for us, as a Jewish community, there was ongoing worry about Israel and the Middle East.

Forgive me; did you think I was talking about this year? I should have been clearer. I meant 1967.

You know, it's funny, it does seem that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Has it really been forty years since the 'Summer of Love?'

Forty is one of those numbers that makes Jewish ears sit up and take notice. There is Noah's little forty day cruise and Moses' two forty day camping trips up Mount Sinai. And then there are the Israelites who we joined on the border of the Promised Land this morning, forty years after leaving Egypt. In fact, I think I can hear Shmuel turning to Yankel even now, 'Yankel, has it really been forty years? It seems like it was only yesterday, that summer at the mountain, when we lovingly dedicated ourselves to God. I mean, look at Moses! He hasn't aged a bit! He doesn't look a day over one hundred.'

'No kidding Shmuel! We spent that summer listening to Moses instruct us about all the things we had to do in order to live a good life. And, forty years later, here we are listening to Moses give us instructions about how to live a good life! He really hasn't changed a bit!'

Of course, things do change. Yankel and Shmuel are members of a new generation, one born in freedom, a generation not chained to the old school slave mentality that plagued their parents. At each bad turn of events they yearned for a return to the good ol' days in Egypt. But this new generation, they are better equipped for the challenge of conquering the Promised Land. Right! You know what they say, "The more things change ..." This new generation, who had not even experienced Egypt, nonetheless, sings the same old song about the good days in Cairo, during their own times of struggle and challenge. This generation will prove that they are equally capable of falling prey to the human weakness for idolatry and other, um, human temptations. And, you know what? Many, many generations later not that much has changed.

And so, we stand today with our Israelite ancestors on the edge of a Promised Land, listening once again to sage words of advice admonishing us to stay true to the values and ideals that will make the land we are entering into a truly blessed place.

Forty years ago, my generation stood at the foot of a mountain, and heard other inspiring words, not from Moses but from a Jewish kid from Minnesota, Robert Alan Zimmerman:

He called out to us:

“Come gather 'round people
Wherever you roam
And admit that the waters
Around you have grown
And accept it that soon
You'll be drenched to the bone.
If your time to you
Is worth savin'
Then you better start swimmin'
Or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin'.

Ah, what a nice Jewish boy – what a nice Jewish message! So much seemed possible. So much hope. So much optimism.

But time keeps on slippin' slippin' slippin' into the future. And unlike the Israelites on the edge of the Promised Land who, forty years later, heard the same voice their parents had heard at the Mountain, today there is a different voice.

“Me and all my friends
We're all misunderstood
They say we stand for nothing and
There's no way we ever could

Now we see everything that's going wrong
With the world and those who lead it
We just feel like we don't have the means
To rise above and beat it

So we keep waiting
Waiting on the world to change

It's not that we don't care,
We just know that the fight ain't fair
So we keep on waiting
Waiting on the world to change

What's happened? Forty years later we've grown: older, heavier, balder. In our encounter with the world we have become harder, more cynical, more wary and less trusting. There is a pervasive sense that the issues are too big, the problems too insurmountable, our leaders too insincere and our ability to make a difference too remote.

Don't get me wrong. I love John Mayer, the composer of this song. I listen to it him all the time. But as a child of the 60's this song really depresses me. Bob Dylan where are you?!

Thankfully, as a Jew, another voice calls to me: a voice not influenced by changes in cultures or the vicissitudes of the generations. A voice whose song of protest and revolution we heard at the Mountain and again, 40 years later on the edge of the Promised Land. A song that we heard in 1967 and that a generation later remains the same; a tune that hasn't changed in 40 or 400 or even 4000 years.

In every word we utter, every ritual we perform, a voice reminds us, that here is no such thing as waitin' on the world to change, because it won't change if we don't change it.

Judaism, I'm proud to say, is the original counter culture revolution of the 60's. Each of us who take upon our shoulders the mantle of Jewish values is a child of the 1960s, (that is 1960 b.c.e.). Judaism is the revolution, whose purpose, according to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, is to "cultivate uneasiness with the injustice of the world. Judaism, he teaches, is a tradition of dissatisfaction with the broken state of things. It places upon us, as Rabbi Sack's cleverly puts it, response – ability, the ability and the obligation to respond to the fractures and brokenness of our world.

It is not a task that we are to wait for others to accomplish. The Torah today speaks in the clearest possible terms: We were reminded again, just a few minutes ago: "It's not up in the heavens. Don't say to me 'I don't have the means to rise up there and get it.' "It's not on the other side of the Pacific." Don't tell me you have to keep on waitin' for someone to bring it over to you." "No, it is right here. You have it in your heart, so buckle up your boot straps, hike up those knickers and make it happen. Stop waiting! Choose love, choose blessing, and choose to make a difference. Choose life." Could it be any clearer? Our tradition demands of us a life of holiness defined in simple acts of compassion and justice, as we will hear this afternoon, "loving others as you love yourself."

"But," you say, "really, it's not that I don't care. It's just that the fight ain't fair!" What was one of the first lessons we learned about life? Who said anything about fair? "Not to worry," our sages teach us: *Lo alecha hamlachah ligmor*, you don't have to win the war, you just can't walk away from the fight. Just do your part. Pay it forward. Pursue the cause of *tikkun olam*. Do your part

to repair the world daily: in your care for yourself, in your relationship with others and in your stewardship of God's creation. *V'lo atah ben horin l'hibatayl mimenah* – because, fair or not, you are never free from your obligation.

To my delight, John Mayer seems to have reached his own understanding of this obligation – and of his obligation as a prophet to a generation that stands at the mountain and clings on his every lyric. Watching the advertising for this past summer's Live Earth concert I couldn't help but notice that he was scheduled to perform. A rather strange thing, I thought, for someone who sings of not having the power to make a difference in the world. "And what," I wondered, "would he sing?" He did, indeed sing this most popular song, but with a little twist. "We can't be waitin' he sang, can't be 'waitin' on the world to change." Thankfully, he's changed his tune.

The High Holy Days come as an urgent reminder to pay heed to a much more ancient song – a song that calls out across the generations: "Justice for all." The pursuit of justice is not easy and certainly not always comfortable. But, really, do we have another choice? As this day progresses and we grow increasingly hungry and thirsty, our own petty discomforts provide a small taste of the injustice of this world. How many feel this discomfort every day? What have we done to alleviate it? What do we do to protect those who need our shelter? We can't be waitin' on the world, 'cause the world ain't gonna act.

Yom Kippur is a day for commitment to action. In many congregations someone will be standing in front of the community asking for a commitment. Don't think I am going to let you off the hook. I am asking you for a pledge as well. I am asking you for a commitment to making a difference in the world this year. As you leave this sanctuary today you are going to receive a card like this one. Tonight, I want you to sit down and consider, discuss with your family, your friends what commitments you will make to them, to this, your TAS family, to our local community and beyond. You have heard Gina issue a plea for Jewish World Watch on behalf of the enslaved of Darfur. How are you going to help address the human, ecological and environmental injustice that plague and threaten us all? You don't have to solve the problem, but you do have to do your part. So, consider what commitments you are going to make, then fill in your card and display it somewhere prominent – a bulletin board, your refrigerator, somewhere where for the remainder of the year this card will serve as a reminder that this year, you are not sitting around waitin' on the world to change. And, finally, I hope you will share your commitments with me, with all of us. Send me an email, write me a letter, and I will compile a list of all our commitments – how we as a community are going to change the world in the next year.

So, as you begin to consider your pledge, I invite you to listen to the music of Jewel Kilcher whose beautiful words address the perspectives of this day, the same vision as those who stood at the Mountain in that Summer of the Greatest Love, and those who, like us, stand this day on the border of a Promised Land.

In these words I hope you find the perspective that I have tried to share with you over these High Holy Days, that we are God's hands, we are God's eyes, we are God's heart, each one of us, *b'tzelem Elohim*.

"Hands"
by Jewel Kilcher

If I could tell the world just one thing
It would be that we're all OK
And not to worry 'cause worry is wasteful
And useless in times like these
I won't be made useless
I won't be idle with despair
I will gather myself around my faith
For light does the darkness most fear

My hands are small, I know
But they're not yours, they are my own
But they're not yours, they are my own
And I am never broken

Poverty stole your golden shoes
It didn't steal your laughter
And heartache came to visit me
But I knew it wasn't ever after
We'll fight, not out of spite
For someone must stand up for what's right
'Cause where there's a man who has no voice
There ours shall go singing

My hands are small I know ...

In the end only kindness matters
I will get down on my knees, and I will pray

My hands are small I know ...

We are never broken
We are God's eyes
God's hands
God's mind
We are God's eyes
God's hands
God's heart
We are God's eyes
God's hands
God's eyes
We are God's hands
We are God's hands