

Earth Remains the Same Forever?

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Chol ha'Moed Sukkot Shabbat – October 14, 2022

“One generation goes, another comes

But the Earth remains the same forever ...

There is nothing new beneath the sun.”

So begins the book of Kohelet (also known as Ecclesiastes), tied to our celebration of Sukkot. You know this book even if you don't **think** you know it - chapter 3 gives us the lyrics of the Byrds song “Turn Turn Turn:” to everything, there is a season, a time and purpose under heaven.

Kohelet is a text that shouts at us, repeatedly, that in spite of every unique gift we think we bring to this world, our Earth marches on, with or without us. Everything we hold sacred, everything we consider mundane - all of it is ephemeral. All is temporary. What is temporary is eternal.

It's a bold choice for a sacred text, especially during *z'man simchateinu* - this “*season of great rejoicing,*” as Sukkot is known.

In a “normal” year (and who even remembers a ‘normal’ year, anyway?) I would try to make a link between Kohelet's existential crisis and the impermanent structure of the *sukkah*; between the unremarkable, endless passing of time with which Kohelet is obsessed and the “*just-me-and-the-natural-world*” vibe of those who spend this holiday dwelling in a *sukkah*: eating, entertaining, reading, working ... casually living ... all at the whim of Earth's elements.

But ... this is **not** a normal year. It's not even a normal week.

Like so many of you, I was shocked this past Sunday ... to learn of a leaked audio tape featuring now-former LA City Council President Nury Martinez in conversation with Council members Kevin de Leon and Gil Cedillo with County Federation of Labor President Ron Herrera. Nearly one year ago, in close quarters, the quartet shared abhorrent, racist, crude remarks and insults about their fellow Angelenos ... about the son of their fellow council member Mike Bonin, about Jews and Blacks and Armenians and others ... and it was all caught on tape, released less than a month before the November 8 general election.

Why and how the tape - or tapes - came to exist is beyond me, beyond most of us. Upon learning what had happened, those of us with even the smallest shred of faith in the principles of democracy likely experienced profound disappointment: *these are the people elected to serve us?* Los Angeles, our home - a vast metropolis proud of its history, its heritage, its diversity - *this is what we've been reduced to?*

We at Isaiah hold our civic responsibilities sacred; involvement in local, state and federal issues is a central tenet of our synagogue's identity. We know that while we may not always agree politically, our *engagement* in the democratic process ... is non-negotiable.

All that took place within and beyond City Hall this week ... announcements and apologies, leaves of absence and resignations, calls for *more* resignations, tearful speeches, shouting, protests, anger, rage, disgust ... even President Biden weighing in before his own pre-planned trip to LA... all of it ... did it reveal the worst in us?

Kohelet claimed "*there is nothing new under the sun.*" Was he right?

Lately it seems there is no "cap" on the amount of hate speech one can hear, or observe, or bear witness to in a given day. It's completely pervasive; it reaches every corner of our lives, our

discourse, our communication with anyone beyond ourselves. That certainly isn't new, though it seems to have taken on renewed fervor over the last two and a half years; as my therapist recently shared, there's a widespread unofficial diagnosis of "jerk" (she used more colorful language) running rampant in the lives of clients these days.

But now it seems every single time I open my Instagram app, I'm seeing yet another instance of anti-semitic graffiti on a college campus, or threats openly made against Jewish students, or a billboard denouncing Jews in the Fairfax district of LA, or Kanye West ... oy, where to even begin with Kanye? Over the past several years we've absolutely watched the uptick in reported instances of antisemitism, a dramatic increase in verbal threats and violent acts against Jews, and the forced removal of Jewish voices from conversations on diversity, equity and inclusion.

But even as we've watched this surge in anti-Jewish hate unfold ... deep down ... I think we knew ... antisemitism never truly went *away*.

There is nothing new under the sun ... when it comes to anti-Jewish hate, Kohelet was right about that. Antisemitism has been lurking just around the corner - if not fully slapping you in the face - since the dawn of time; one need look no further than our own history books to realize it.

In the book "*People Love Dead Jews*" by Dara Horn - which, in spite of its cheeky title is a fascinating, disturbing read - the author proves her point that communities around the world only appreciate their Jews once they are no longer alive. From the Jewish ghetto in Venice to Harbin, China to Vichy, France to Jersey City, Horn traces a familiar path, illuminating for her readers the ways our world has consistently sought opportunities to rid its communities of Jews. The reasons why span the gamut - but suffice to say, you cannot finish Horn's book without a pit in your stomach, or a newfound perspective on *why* these past few years have felt so soul-crushing, so exhausting, and ...yet ... kinda familiar.

The truth is, as long as there is pain and suffering and hardship in this world, far too many folks feel they must seek out someone to *blame* for it. And all too often, those who find themselves on the receiving end of that blame are ... “other.” Minorities. Strangers, Foreigners. Those who are repeatedly told they’re “*not like us,*” whomever “*us*” is.

What was particularly upsetting about what took place in City Hall this week ... was that the voices we heard on those tapes belonged to individuals who wear their minority status as a badge of honor! Those who are - rightfully - deeply proud to have achieved status and success ... in the complex world of politics.

There is nothing new under the sun ... the Earth remains the same forever ... well, maybe Kohelet was wrong.

Because ... there were a few things that felt a little different this week. From the protestors who packed City Hall, rightfully outraged, demanding resignations, declaring folks so filled with hate be removed from office immediately ... to the graceful, stirring, heartbreaking speech of Council Member Mike Bonin ... to the social media posts of celebrities (*no, not nearly enough of them*) calling out Kanye’s bigotry ... to non-Jewish allies at my alma mater, UC Davis ... publicly denouncing recent acts of anti-Jewish hate on campus, investing in relationships with Jewish students and leaders, prioritizing an initiative called “Addressing Antisemitism” with its entire student body.

Dara Horn writes about the 2018 Tree of Life synagogue massacre in “*People Love Dead Jews,*” connecting it with her research on anti-Jewish pogroms. While giving folks a “silver lining” is not her focus - not one bit, if you’ve read the book - there is a moment where she acknowledges just how different the broader Pittsburgh, US and global communities responded to the massacre than their

ancestors did one century ago in Eastern Europe: with sorrow. Empathy. Kindness. Solidarity. Compassion. Care. Respect. Love.

I experienced that on a personal level, too. The same weekend of the Tree of Life massacre, a non-Jewish friend of mine who's reached a truly impressive level of success in the country music world - she's been nominated for a Grammy, sold out Ryman Auditorium in Nashville, she's on TV shows like "The Voice" - I love her to pieces, but she doesn't really have a whole lot of free time to hang with peons like me ... she called me. "*I'm in LA to film something,*" she said. "*I don't have a whole lot of time, but I'd really like to see you. Even if it's just for a quick hug. I just want you to know ... you're not alone. I am so proud of you for serving the Jewish community. And I want you to know ... that I'm here for you, and **I will show up** for your community.*"

Around one hundred ten years ago in Galitzia, in what is now southeastern Poland and Western Ukraine, my great grandparents decided it was time to leave. They came to America armed with hope and optimism, searching for a new beginning ... and better lives for their children. Over a century later, their great granddaughter - a woman! - is a Reform rabbi in West LA, raising two young boys with her feminist husband. It would probably blow their minds.

"One generation goes, another comes

But the Earth remains the same forever ...

There is nothing new beneath the sun."

Maybe, maybe not.

Hate will always exist in our world. Trauma will impact us in different ways, forever. Anger and rage will constantly present themselves. People will repeatedly shock us with just how much hatred they

can hold inside their hearts. Whether in politics or entertainment or sports or religion or everyday human communication ... hate will *always* be present.

But - love will *also* always be present. Hope and optimism and collaboration and solidarity will always be present. Anger and rage can become fuel for activism. Empathy CAN be our compass, pointing us forward.

We humans will always have the capacity to DO good, to TEACH goodness, to NURTURE and to FOSTER goodness at every age. The question is - *will we choose to?*

Earth remains the same forever? We shall see.

Shabbat Shalom.