

**Pete Seeger:
One Jew's Views on His Legacy and Life
Parashat Terumah; January 31, 2014**

A story, from the book of Joshua. The people stood at the banks of the river, and were not sure how to cross over into land. But then, we read “the waters coming down from upstream piled up in a single heap... and all Israel crossed over on dry land, until the entire nation had finished crossing the Jordan.”

This story is so familiar that... well, wait. I admit, until I studied it in rabbinical school I had never heard of it. I'll venture a guess that not too many of you are familiar with this tale either.

Why not? One Chasidic rabbi, listed in my sources only as “Rabbi A. Chein,” gives the following answer: “The miracle of the splitting of the Red Sea endures in the memory of the people on account of the song they sang at the sea...” the powerful words of exuberance and gratitude most familiar to us as the prayer “Mi Kamocha.” But, Chein goes on, “the miracle of the splitting of the Jordan has not survived in our memory because... there was no song.”

My friends, if there is anyone, anywhere, who has ever illustrated the power of the song to move mountains and change the world, it is the giant figure we lost this past week, Pete Seeger. Not two, not three, but over a dozen of you have shared a sense of deep sadness and loss, a hole in our hearts which his voice once filled. Some of us have cried, others drifted off into reflection: when we heard his music, what he meant to us. Some of us share

stories of having heard him live, or even having met him in person. Truly, the stories and causes he brought forth with his banjo lived for us; they have been some of the central issues in our lives for...well, in my case, for my entire life.

Pete Seeger was about, I think, “giving voice.” He heard and preserved, performed and recorded and revived a whole tradition of pre-digital folk music which otherwise might have disappeared. He gave voice to old music, and gave venues to new musicians, with promotion and support and partnership and collaboration.

And he gave voice to the causes that, either with him or in part because of him, we came to care about the most. My youth would be less whole and my understanding of the costs of war more poor, my hope for peace less complete without “Where Have All the Flowers Gone?” My sense of justice would be lacking without having the injunction, somewhere in the back of my memory, to “Look for the Union Label.” My sense of self and my understanding of the suburbs would be weaker without “Little Boxes.” The legendary late Joe Glazer may have sung it right here on our pulpit for Labor on the Bimah in 2005, but it was Pete Seeger’s setting, pacing and publication of “We Shall Overcome” that earned this song its place at the heart of the civil rights movement. And I am not sure the modern environmental movement would have been the same without him, neither clean water standards without his love of the Hudson, nor blue recycling bins without his song “Garbage.”

Before I go on I want to take a moment, to turn to you: what was, what is, the biggest way you can think of that this man touched your life? What did he add? What would have been missing without him?

Much has been written in the Jewish press in recent days, of course, on the question of whether he was “good for the Jews.” The issue, as usual, is Israel, and his recent possible support of the BDS movement. But let’s be clear: Seeger himself was hard to categorize on this issue – and he proclaimed a position which was constantly evolving, and said that he was open to new information. As recently as four years ago he did work on behalf of the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies in the Negev, resisting pressure to withdraw. And he was a leftist for long enough that he remembered a different Israel – an egalitarian ethos, a socialist vision... an image of Israel which he and the Weavers actually helped awaken in America with their rendition and wide-spread performance of “Tzena, Tzena,” beginning in 1950. A critic of Israel late in his life, perhaps, but he remained a believer in dialogue, and supporter of Israel *and* the Palestinians. He was never an anti-Zionist, as so many modern leftists have become, and he remained sensitive to Jewish narrative and need.

As did many artists and authors and ordinary Americans alike, he suffered for his beliefs in justice and equality – he ducked and dodged and brilliantly redirected questions of the House Un-American Affairs Committee in the mid-1950’s, and while he avoided prison for contempt of Congress, he was

banned from network television until the Smothers Brothers eventually broke the back of the blacklist in the last 1960's. In the midst of the political divisions and vitriolic rhetoric in our midst today, it is perhaps useful to recall an era when things were even more divided, more fearful... an era we survived and which led to a new time of openness and creativity in its aftermath.

Creativity and hope in the face of fear. That is, perhaps, the message I am left with now that Pete Seeger is gone. He gave voice to so much, and he kept on singing even as his voice grew weaker. He was passionate, and committed; he cared and he shared and he made a difference in the world.

If his voice has fallen silent it is, then, now up to us: to see clearly, to find our voices and to use them. There are so many needs in our midst. There are so many who cry out in need. Which voices will we hear? And what song will we write, to make music out of madness? Shiru L'A Shir Chadash... sing unto God a new song...

On the Jewish calendar, this Shabbat we read Parashat Terumah, the Torah portion from the middle of Exodus in which we first receive the instructions to build the tabernacle. While the words of Ecclesiastes come to mind, of "Turn, Turn, Turn," as a tempting choice, still, because of the portion... there is, for Cantor Levine and me, just one choice what music to turn to at this point, as anthem and reflection, in tribute and in memory. May Pete Seeger's spirit live in us, and through us. May his song be on our lips and in our lives forever. ["IF I had a hammer..."]