



Sing Again the Song of Justice

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The rapper Ice-T, who rose to mainstream stardom in the Rodney King era with the venomous, angry, anti-police anthem “Cop Killer,” now plays a cop on TV. Asked about this irony by talk radio host David Greene, he reflects that music saved his life.

He says, “Before rap came along I was actively in the streets getting in trouble – doing the wrong thing. My father died early. My mother died early. I started hanging with the gangs. I’m out in the streets. I’m committing crimes. And the music came along. And this music just took me on a different road.”

That different road led him to express his anger through what he calls the “competition poetry” and “verbal gymnast[ics]” of rapping. And it ultimately led him to acting, where he has won awards for portraying police officer Fin Tutuola for the last 12 years on *Law & Order: SVU*. Music transformed his life. But in his new documentary film, “Something from Nothing: The Art of Rap,” he contends music has lost its way.

“I think all music,” he says, “not just rap – has fallen into this very diluted, delusional state, where everyone’s singing about money and having cars, and having all this fun; when really, people are losing their homes. You’ve got the Wall Street situation, the sub-prime situation... We’ve got wars... unemployment. But the music doesn’t reflect that.”

Hearing Ice-T’s lament, I thought of an observation popular in Israel today. When the State was new, the saying goes, all the food was *lach*, “yours.” *Kreplach*, *rugelach*, *kneidelach*. Today, everything ends with “*li*,” “mine.” The prime example: favorite children’s snack “*Bisli*.”

Cultural commentators say that this quirk of naming popular foods reflects a broader cultural issue. The modern world is quickly moving from a shared collective

vision of life revolving around broad, societal issues and passion for change, to the navel-gazing myopia of “me” – my interests, my comfort, my life, to the exclusion of much else.

In America, the Facebook phenomenon is often cited to attest to this principle. Now, we’ve all seen Facebook used from time to time to transmit messages of awareness and responsibility, but for many, those messages are few and far between. More common are the posts about soccer games and TV shows, jokes, gossip and chit-chat. For every post linking to an article about hunger in Africa, there are twenty more detailing our kids’ last day at school or what we made for dinner.

The ancient Greeks had a cautionary tale about such self-involvement – about Narcissus, who is so interested in himself that he starves staring at his reflection. We Jews have a cautionary tale too. And it is found in our *parasha* this morning.

The Israelites are poised at the edge of the Promised land. God says, send in scouts ahead of you to scout out this land I am giving to you. You can almost hear God’s pride and excitement, like a parent about to give a long-wished-for gift reveling in the child’s joy – “Yes, you can peek under the wrapping – look how great it is!”

But, as we all know, things don’t go quite as anticipated. The scouts go to the Land and there they find grapes so big they have to be carried by two on a pole, people who are thriving so on the bounty the land produces that they are like giants.

God wanted the people to see promise, potential, and a gift that would help them thrive too. God wanted the people to look OUT, to see what they could accomplish there as a community.

Instead, famously, they draw in, in to their own fears and limitations. “The people there are giants,” they report. Compared to them, “In our eyes, we seemed like grasshoppers.”

With those fateful words, the entire community panics. We know the end of the story: They refuse to go into the land and find themselves wandering 40 more years in the desert. When we only see ourselves, the Torah warns us, we are destined for failure.

Perspective matters. How we see ourselves in this world matters. If we turn inward, to our own concerns, our worries about our homes, our relationships alone, we doom ourselves not just to see ourselves as grasshoppers, but to be grasshoppers. For the grasshopper, who worries about food and shelter and comfort for himself, makes no deep impact on the world.

If we want to matter, if we want our stories to shape the ages, we've got to reach beyond.

And that is why Ice-T is right – perhaps even a canary in the coal-mine of our cultural experience. Because once, not too long ago, music inspired our nation to justice.

Bob Dylan's anthems didn't just remind us that the times they are a'changing, but roused us to change them ourselves. Phil Ochs' "Going Down to Mississippi" ignited suburban youth to rise for civil rights. Pete Seeger's "Strangest Dream" inspired us to believe in the possibility of peace. Marlo Thomas's "Free to Be You and Me" taught a new generation to implement equality.

Today Lady Gaga's powerhouse issue-music has to do with self-esteem, and the number one single in America today pleads not for awareness but for a love interest to "Call Me Maybe."

What happened to the transformative power of music? In a world where children are tortured, used as shields, entire towns massacred in Syria, where infants in India are killed for the crime of being born a girl, where acid attacks for daring to go to school are on the rise in Afghanistan, where slavery is still a reality, where hunger and disease, hatred and racism boil around the world, where are our anthems, where are our protest songs?

Instead of rising up and being galvanized, Americans today are making ourselves into grasshoppers, humming away catchy tunes about ourselves.

I don't know what to do about Syria. I have no magic plan for ending hunger or bringing safety to girls around the world. But I do know that if we are ever going to find answers, together, we must lift ourselves beyond the details of our day-to-day lives to give voice to serious challenges in the places that most matter.

And that is what we are doing here today. While our mainstream culture may not be singing the song, our liturgy does. But we too often mumble through our liturgy. We sing-song it with such familiarity that it has no impact. Our challenge is to listen to its prophetic call to hear it, to own it – to allow it to speak to our hearts and animate our hands.

Because the music of our prayers is our Bob Dylan. The *Sim Shalom* our Phil Ochs, crying out for peace. The *Adon Olam* our charge for justice. The *Aleinu* our reminder that we must not allow ourselves to be grasshoppers; the responsibility for making this world a reflection of God's kingdom rests on us.

Today, our tradition charges us: *Shiru L'Adonai Shir Chadash*. Sing to the Lord a new song. Not the song of our provincial interests but the song of a world longing for repair, a world waiting for us to dream bigger, to care more, to work harder, to reach higher – to believe again – that we can transform the world, and ourselves, with our ancient, timeless, revitalized song.

The world is waiting. Let us sing again the song of justice.