

Chevre,

I hope that all of you enjoyed a restful and restorative Shabbat...

As part of his Omer-counting experience, Marc Litz shared with me a lovely poem that he composed in the Japanese tradition:

Counting stones along a path

As counted breaths-quiet the chaos

In Omer Counting blessings are owned

His lyric prompted me to give some thought to the origins of Japanese poetry, and some of the ways in which they overlap with our tradition.

In 905, poet Ki no Tsurayuki observed, “The poetry of Japan has its seeds in the human heart and mind and grows into the myriad leaves of words...it is poetry that effortlessly moves the heavens and the earth, awakens the world of invisible spirits to deep feeling, softens the relationships between men and women, and consoles the hearts of fierce warriors.”

Basho’s poems from the 17th century capture this movement of heaven and earth, and the movement *between* heaven and earth, in astonishingly crystalline ways. Here are two of them:

Stillness—

Soaking into the rocks,

The cicada’s cries

On a bare branch,

A crow had landed:

Autumn nightfall

Basho's poems are poems of pure perception, but through pure perception, he also points us inwards towards a state of pure being.

From the same era, Izumi Shikibu writes with similar "just this and only this" brevity, but her concentrated focus opens up limitless pathways of experience:

*Although the wind
blows terribly here,
the moonlight also leaks
between the roof planks
of this ruined house*

Could there be a more beautiful way to express the belief that growth and enlightenment can only result from exposing ourselves to pain and suffering?

With this poetic lineage in mind, and returning for a moment to Moses's encounter with the Burning Bush, there have of course been numerous scientific explanations proffered to make sense of this. Botanists have noted, for example, the *Dictamnus albus* plant, found throughout northern Africa, is also known as a "gas plant" because it exudes a variety of volatile oils that can catch fire readily and may give a visual impression that it is burning.

Others have suggested that perhaps Moses was having a hallucinatory experience similar to when one has ayahuasca, during which time seems to stand still. Along these lines, cognitive psychologist Benny Shannon, of Hebrew University, proposes that, "Moses's sense of time changed and an actual moment in physical time was subjectively perceived as an eternity...enough time for the bush in front of him to be burned and consumed.

These, and other speculations, are certainly worth considering, and impossible to rule out, but isn't it also worth considering that Moses, similar to the Japanese poets we have been discussing, was uniquely capable of a sharpened vision and deepened sensibility that allowed him to see what others could not?

Ono no Komachi, from the same era as Basho and Shikibu, composed the following poem:

The beauty of the flowers faded—

No one cared—

And I watched myself

Grow old in the world

As the long rains were falling

Komachi has magically condensed an eternity into her simple, spare, elegant poem. Isn't that, in a sense, what Moses experiences at the Burning Bush, mortality and immortality paradoxically commingled in a way that brought about a state of holiness and intimate contact with the Divine?

So many of the poems in the Japanese tradition that I have read and enjoyed over the years seem to emerge from these rare, flickering and heart-wrenchingly transient moments of full human consciousness, the “dearest freshness deep down things”, in the words of British poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. But concentrating on these moments, small fleeting as they are, can bring an entire glittering world into being for us—and perhaps for others, as well.

Thank you, Marc, for helping me to stir these connections into words :)

Here is the transliterated prayer to recite before the Counting. If you have a copy of the Reconstructionist prayerbook, *Kol Haneshamah*, this prayer, and some additional thoughts and meditations, can be found on pages 674-683:

Baruch atah adonay eloheynu Melech ha'olam, asher kideshanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al sefirat ha'omer

Blessed are you, Eternal, our God, the sovereign of all worlds, who has made us holy with your mitzvot, and commanded us concerning the counting of the Omer

Ha-yom chamesha asar yamim l'omer

This is the 15th day of the Omer

Sticking with tonight's visit with Asian artistry, our musical selection, “Tegami” is by Aki Angela, a songwriter born in Japan. I have pasted translated lyrics below the link:

<https://youtu.be/w7bl8TN7ECQ>

Greetings

You who are reading this, where are you and what are you doing now?
I'm 15 and there 's something worrying me
That I can 't talk to anyone about
But if I address a letter to my future self
Then I know I 'll be able to speak my mind

[Chorus]

I feel like giving up now, I feel like crying, I feel like I 'm going to disappear
Whose words should I trust as I move forward?
My one and only heart has broken into pieces time and time again
And I 'm living through painful times now
I'm living in the present

[Verse 2]

Greetings

Thank you, I have something to tell your 15-year-old self
If you keep asking yourself why and where you should go
The answer will become clear
The seas of adolescence can be rough
But keep sailing the boat that is your dream towards tomorrow 's shore

[Chorus]

Don't give up now, don't cry, when you feel like you 're going to disappear
Then you should trust your own voice and move forward
Even an adult like me gets hurt and has sleepless nights
But I'm living in the bittersweet present

[Bridge]

Everything in life has meaning
So don't be afraid to follow your dream
Keep on believing

[Chorus]

I feel like giving up now, I feel like crying, I feel like I'm going to disappear
Whose words should I trust as I move forward?
Ah, don't give up now, don't cry, when you feel like you're going to disappear

Then you should trust your own voice and move forward
No matter what stage of your life you're in
You can't get by without going through sadness
Show me a smile, let's live in the present
Let's live in the present

[Outro]

Greetings

I pray that you who are reading this

Will be happy

A reminder that if you would like to suggest a song that you believe would also fit in with this year's theme of "Liberation", feel free to back-channel me a YouTube link, and I'll see if I can insert it into the playlist at some point during these 7 weeks. Music from any genre and of any era will be cheerfully considered by the host :)