

Parashat Haazinu 5777 Robert Zimmerman Nobel Laureate

I am going to read a poem and you tell me who is it talking about and who wrote it:

Well, the neighborhood bully, he's just one man,
His enemies say he's on their land
They got him outnumbered about a million to one
He got no place to escape to, no place to run
He's the neighborhood bully

The neighborhood bully just lives to survive
He's criticized and condemned for being alive
He's not supposed to fight back, he's supposed to have thick skin
He's supposed to lay down and die when his door is kicked in
He's the neighborhood bully

Who is the neighborhood bully?
Who wrote the song?

Robert Zimmerman, aka, Bob Dylan, who won the Nobel Prize for literature this past week.

Here's a little side note about Dylan's song about Israel. One verse goes like this:

Now his holiest books have been trampled upon
No contract he signed was worth what it was written on
He took the crumbs of the world and he turned it into wealth
Took sickness and disease and turned it into health

Irony that this week, UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, passed a resolution declaring that there is no Jewish historical connection to the Temple Mount or to the Western Wall. 24 countries voted in favor, 6 against, and 26 abstained.

Now our holiest sites have been trampled upon ... and our participation in the UN isn't worth the paper it was written upon.

The UNESCO executive director herself criticized the anti-Israel resolution calling the Temple Mount sacred to both Jews and Moslems.

Anyway, enough about the intersection of the news and Bob Dylan's being awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. This was the first time the award was given out to a song writer.

Dylan's music has been enormously influential to an entire generation. His famous songs: Blowin' in the Wind and Forever Young, to name just two, are classics that are still sung at summer camps and youth retreats.

Over 130 Jewish people have been awarded Nobel Prizes over the years! Between 1910 and 1950, Jews won 14% of Nobel Prizes in Literature and Science; between 1951 and 2000, 32% of prizes in Medicine, 32% in Physics, 39% in Economics, and 29% in Science. Not bad for a people who make up such a tiny percentage of the world's population.

But what about Dylan? Can we claim him as an MOT?

I'm not sure, but this is what we know:

Dylan grew up in a kosher home in Minnesota and attended Camp Herzl, a Zionist summer camp. His Hebrew name is Shabtai Zisl ben Avraham. When he began his journey into folk music he changed his name to Bob Dylan and went out of his way to hide his former identity.

In the late 1970's Dylan had an interest in evangelical, that is "born again," Christianity. However, since the 1980's, he has made unannounced visits to ultra-orthodox synagogues and Rabbis. He has participated in some Chabad telethons and has put on refilling at the Western Wall when he went to Israel to perform.

His life has been a journey and he has searched for spirituality.

Some of his music has connections to Jewish themes or Biblical books.

For example, Blowin in the Wind:

How many roads must a man walk down before you call him a man?

...

Yes and how many years can a mountain exist before it's washed to the sea?

Yes and how many years can some people exist before they're allowed to be free

...

The answer my friend is blowing in the wind...

The holiday of Succoth commemorates our journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land. Is there a hint of that in the roads that are walked and the people becoming free?

The answer my friend is blowing in the wind.

Here's another one. Forever Young:

May God bless and keep you always

May your wishes all come true...

...

May you build a ladder to the stars and climb up every rung

May you stay forever young.

...

This song is said to have been written for Dylan's son, Jakob, ...one of 4 children he had with his wife 1st wife, Sara (who is Jewish).

The song begins with the words of the Priestly Benediction:

Yiverechecha Adonai Veyishmarecha...

And the building of the ladder and climbing every rung has a very clear connection to the story of Jacob in the Bible, who dreamed of a ladder reaching from heaven to earth with angels going down and up.

By the way, Dylan's oldest son with Sara, Jesse, had his Bar Mitzvah at the Western Wall...

So, can we claim Bob Dylan as one of us?

Clearly, he was influenced on his journey through life by Judaism and his Jewish roots...

I think it is particularly appropriate that this award, to a song writer with Jewish roots, was made this week, when we read Parashat Haazinu! This Torah portion, after all, contains the famous song that Moses sang to the Jewish people on their journey into the Promised Land!

You see, we have a long history of Jewish folk singers!

I say: Let's add him to our list of **Jewish** Nobel Prize winners!