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Parashat Behar-Bechukotai

Can You Hear Me Now?: Walking in the Garden

1.

When we used to live in Marin

We had a staircase that went from the main floor to a lower level where the girls shared their bedrooms.

And Minna used to say that she knew which parent was coming down the stairs based on our footsteps

The click click of my heels

Versus the hurried pattern of Michael's shoes, ever eager to see who was downstairs

Of course we also could always tell who was on her way up

Depending on the age, we knew who could climb those steps two at a time, who was still holding onto the banister

And who, having gotten her shoes on all by her whole self was climbing / crawling, one careful step at a time

There's a soundtrack of the people we love, quite literally the sound of our tracks

A soundtrack some of us might even want to escape from time to time

But one that has the potential to open our hearts all the same

There is a really mysterious passage in the story of the Garden of Eden

I mean, let's be serious, the whole story is completely wild

What with trees of life and snakes that speak but we only have one shabbat

So I want to point out this morning
How it is that after Eve and Adam eat from the forbidden tree
Torah says

וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ אֶת־קוֹל יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים מְתַהַלְךְ בַּגֶּן

And it is not at all clear what this means but it is something like
And they heard the sound or the voice of God, walking in the
garden

They heard the קוֹל, the sound¹

And, as we remember, being afraid of what they did, they hide

Now I'm not at all clear they were *not* supposed to eat from that tree
I know that is what it looks like on the surface

But I have, following my father's teaching, always been suspicious of
the forbidden tree in *the* middle of the garden and *the one rule* they
were not supposed to break that they, of course, break

Not to mention the aforementioned talking snake seducing them
into it

But I digress

My point here is that, whether they were on script or off,
They ate that fruit without letting God into their plan, without asking
God any questions

They did it in a hidden, furtive way, a *distancing* way

Allowing for no deeper trust with God to build or even be tested out

--

And so now, we find them, their bellies full of supposedly
contraband fruit

¹ Gen. 3:8

Very Afraid when they hear the sound of God in the garden

We know they're afraid because they hide
And we know they're afraid because they say so

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶת־קוֹלְךָ שָׁמַעְתִּי בַגֶּן וָאִירָא...

When God asks where they are, Adam actually says

I heard קוֹלְךָ your voice, your sound in the garden God

And I was afraid וָאִירָא

[I was afraid because I was naked], and your sound scared me,

וָאֶחְבֵּא so I hid²

2.

Now this sound of God moving through the garden, the sound itself,
this sound needs our attention for a moment

You see

If we pay close attention to exactly what it is Torah says Eve and
Adam first heard

אֱלֹהִים מְתַהַלֵּךְ בַּגֶּן

God was

not walking exactly but

The reflexive, causative of version of that verb to walk

מְתַהַלֵּךְ

In other words, they somehow heard God *moving about* in the
garden

The sound was God moving back and forth, they say

Maybe pacing

Making tracks, holy soundtracks

² Gen. 3:10

Maybe Eve and Adam were hearing the sound of the pitter patter of little divine feet, or God's high heels as they crunched down delicately and purposefully on the fine gravel paths of Eden Or maybe (as it says in *Shir HaShirim Rabba*) they heard the sound of God jumping from heaven to earth and back up again.³

Or maybe this sound of God was more like a voice
As Chizkuni suggests, "they heard the sound of God's voice taking a walk in the garden"⁴
God's voice walking about
God's voice calling out and then subsiding, "Eve.... Adam...."
God's voice just somehow moving through the garden as if it were taking steps,
Or maybe God was singing a piece of a scale, chanting up and down again

The verse is not at all clear

But no matter how we imagine this קָל, this sound
I feel very confident in saying it would have been a familiar sound to Eve and Adam

Because, see, back in the garden, we know
Eve and Adam and God were physically close
Maybe not room mates but they shared that garden
We know they talked all the time, it is right in Torah

And we also know the garden was not infinite
They, just like us, they shared a smaller space, it was intimate

³ Shir HaShirim Rabba 5:1:1

⁴ Chizkuni to Genesis 3:8:1

And I have to imagine they knew each other's movements and sounds

I have to imagine their different voices were clear and audible to one another

As were the sounds of their patterns of movement that made up all their days and nights

So whether it was the sound of God's *voice* or the sound of God moving through the garden or something else entirely
They had heard it many times

And while the sound itself is worth our attention
After all, this was the soundtrack of God, whom they loved,
In this moment the precise sound matters less to us than
Their response to it

That is, it is Eve and Adam's response of fear and their hiding from this familiar sound that draws our attention this shabbat
Because this response teaches us
How, when we create distance amongst ourselves
and between ourselves and God
The most natural, common, even loving sounds can become fraught,
sources of fear

3.

Now that we have learned the phrase

אֱלֹהִים מְתַהַלֵּךְ בַּגֶּן

God moving about in the garden, a moving that is ongoing, around, repetitive

We can see this same unusual verb **מִתְהַלֵּךְ** (reflexive for movement) is in our Torah this week

In the description of what it feels like to be blessed

God says,

If you get close to me

וְהִתְהַלַּכְתִּי בְּתוֹכְכֶם

I will walk back and forth among you

I will walk about, circle, pace, pitter patter

And as we know from the Garden of Eden

we might *feel* this divine walking among us and we might also *hear* it, or maybe both –

As if God is alluding to the Garden of Eden in this week's blessing

You will *hear* my steps among you, in your hearts, you will hear me in your houses, you will hear me entering your gates

וְהִתְהַלַּכְתִּי בְּתוֹכְכֶם

I will walk back and forth among you

I will be in your midst and you will hear me

We understand this is what it means to feel blessed:

To sense the presence of God among us just like it was in the Garden of Eden

When we spoke freely and knew where God was all the time

When

As it says in one of my favorite midrash

God braided Eve's hair to prepare her for her wedding to Adam

God chose the tree under which they would wed and led Eve there by the hand⁵

That's how close they all were

⁵ Midrash Tanhuma Buber Chayei Sara 2:1

And that is one definition of what it means to feel blessed even now
To feel God so close as to be doing our hair and leading us by the hand
Hearing God's steps as they approach and recede through our lives
in the Garden

4.

But this week's Torah does not only have blessings it has curses
No one ever wants to read the curses
It is even encoded in the tradition
the way the section of curses is chanted in this week's *parasha*
Is quickly, in a whisper, without stopping
Life is hard enough, we feel surely cursed enough
Who needs to read the curses?

But I think after learning about all the sounds of God being so close
I think we can also begin to understand something more

Because, although, I, too, did not want to look closely at the curses
When I did
I noticed

That there were some curses in the list
That were not coming from the outside, like a attack from an enemy,
or a crop that failed
But instead were coming, somehow, from our inside

For example,

וְנִסְתָּם וְאִי־רָדְף אֶתְכֶם

Which means, "And you will flee though no one chases you"⁶

And while, on the one hand, this seems to be the most perfect description of the effects of social media I have ever read
This curse is undoubtedly also describing a broader internal state

This curse is about us being afraid of something *within ourselves*

And even if you believe God somehow has a hand in everything, as I do

You probably also believe, as I do, that we too have a hand in many things

Certainly we have a hand in how we imagine ourselves in the world

And as much as God seems to want to grandstand and blow holy smoke with a lot of fancy, graphic curses in this *parasha*

I do not believe it's possible for even God to make us want to flee *when no one chases us* –

at least not without a good deal of our participation

Just like God alone cannot keep Eve and Adam from hiding when they are determined to hide

So perhaps we learn this is the kind of curse we can only bring on ourselves

As if God wants to say,

Some of this life is in your hands

It is true that if you run you will be far from me, says God
But you don't have to run, you don't have to hide

⁶ Lev. 26:17

No one is actually chasing you
And this curse may be lifted by none other than you

5.

Perhaps this is why – just a few verses later –
God says that those who distance themselves
Will run, will flee

even from the קול / the sound of a leaf blown about.

קול עלה נדר

From the sound of a driven leaf (!)⁷

From the sound of a leaf being swept in the wind and touching, or
beating against another leaf

the sound of leaves tapping against a door frame⁸

In other words

What sound makes those who are already distanced want to run and
hide?

Even the sound of leaves

And what I finally understood this shabbat

Is that when God describes this *self inflicted* curse idea

This idea of our fleeing though no one is chasing us –

God could have done this *without mentioning any sounds at all*

The verse could have easily just been us running from the sound of
nothing (!) –

That would be the most direct way to describe this baseless fear

⁷ Lev. 26:36

⁸ Rashi to Lev. 26:36

But instead

Not only does God say if you stay with me I will walk with you in blessing

וְהֵתְהַלַּכְתִּי בְּתוֹכְכֶם

If you stay with me, I will walk amongst you, around with you

Not only does God say

You will hear my divine soundtrack as I move through the garden of your life

When God wants to describe the opposite idea –

What it feels like to have distance from God and each other

God does not say there will be resounding silence

But rather, instead, God says the most peaceful, familiar sounds

The sound of falling leaves rustling in the wind

Those same peaceful sounds will no longer give us comfort but will frighten us

Just like we were once afraid of the intimate sounds of God moving in the Garden of Eden

As if God wants to say in the clearest of terms

The world is the world is the world

I *always* move through the garden, there are *always* sounds of my walking and the cascading of my voice up and down

As if God wants to say in the clearest of terms

The world is the world is the world

There are *always* sounds of leaves blowing and people we love going up and down our steps

Through our doors and in and out of our gates,

As if God wants to say in the clearest of terms

The world is the world is the world

The sounds from the Garden of Eden and the sounds you hear right now *are the same sounds*

The same sounds as always

The only question is if you will run and hide
or try to draw near.