

Chapels Midst the Roar

“What are you doing here, Elijah?”
(1 Kings 19:9b, 13b)

1 Kings 19:1-13

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on Sixth Sunday of Easter, **May 6, 2018**
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You’ve heard about aerobic exercises, but I wonder if you’ve heard of *neurobic* exercises? Low-intensity workouts for the brain. In 1998 the late Dr. Lawrence Katz, a neurobiologist from Duke Medical Center, published a book titled, *Keep Your Brain Alive: 83 Exercises to Increase Mental Fitness*. Katz prescribed some rather unusual workouts for the brain intended to “engage your attention by breaking routine activities in unexpected ways.” Intentional disruptions of daily and casual habit, suggests Katz, literally exercise neglected channels of the brain. He lists 83 exercises, things like taking a different route to work every now and then, holding your nose as you taste different foods to explore how taste changes, or using your non-dominant hand to go through morning routine of brushing teeth and combing hair.

Sum of it all? Intentionally doing things differently, breaking routine, is a mental trick prompting sensory stimulation, enriching the dendritic connections of the cranium, that branching fiber network carrying impulses from the brain.

The principle applies, I think, not just in biological understanding of the brain, but also to the realm of soul and spirit. In teaching my own academic discipline, Narrative Mechanisms in Hebrew and Semitic literature, I begin by pointing out examples of this mechanism – how an author would intentionally fracture an established pattern in order to sharpen the reader’s focus. I like to begin with Lamentations, where this simple structural principle is obvious at a glance, four of the five chapters having 22 verses while only one chapter, the third, is 66 verses. The rupture of an established pattern is intentional, prompting artistic stimulation. We know something is up, and so begin to explore, finding out that these are acrostic poems using the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, with the middle chapter standing alone, a tripling of the acrostic triggering attention and focus.

To use baseball language, here is the avoiding of monotony by throwing a curve every now and again. Which is why, by the way, children’s sayings can be so delightful, however unintentional. During a much earlier trip to the Holy Land our daughter, Ashley, told our granddaughter Christian, then three years old, that Mimi and Papa had gone to the Holy Land. She took the opportunity to tell Christian stories about Jesus. When Ashley arrived at the daycare center the next afternoon, she noted how the workers were treating her with uncharacteristic tenderness, as if wanting to ask something. Ashley soon understood that this bit of TLC was sympathy when one worker said, “Ashley we’re so sorry to hear about your parents. Christian said you told her last night that her Mimi and Papa had gone to be with Jesus.”

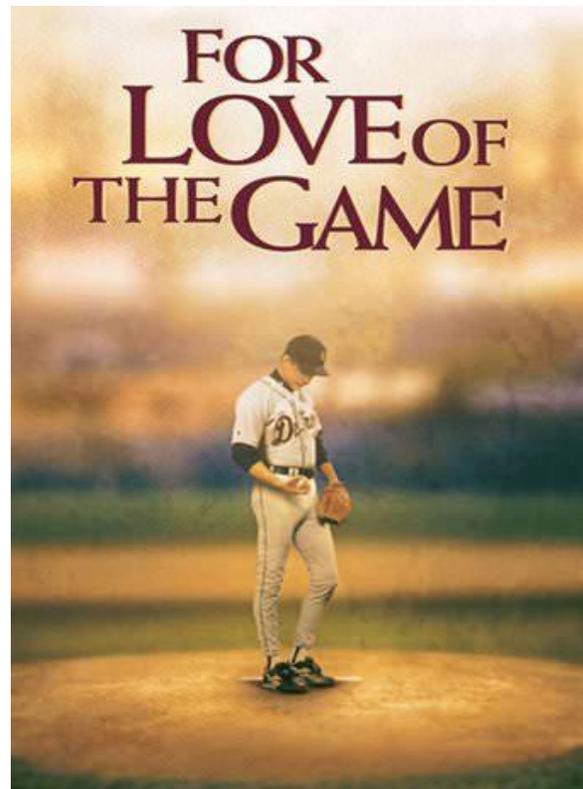
This sort of sensory stimuli is seen in the Jewish observance of Sabbath. For 24 hours beginning Friday evening around sundown, even the most casual greetings change. Instead of “*Shalom*,” the greeting becomes “*Shabbat Shalom*,” a breaking of everyday pattern hardly unimportant, but rather foundational to our Judeo-Christian heritage, the recognition on this one day in seven that, well, something is different. Why is this day different from every other day? Well, this day – Shabbat -- is to be a *Chapel Midst the Roar* of the week.

Chapel Midst the Roar. In the 1999 film, *For Love of the Game*, Kevin Costner plays Billy Chapel, a veteran pitcher for the Detroit Tigers. At forty, Billy Chapel, once an ace, has become mediocre through age and injury, but through sheer determination has survived. The film weaves through the pitching of the last game of the season against his arch rival New York Yankees in Yankee Stadium, inching closer and closer as the film progresses to the magical perfect game, a mowing down of all 27 batters. In between innings, as Billy Chapel sits in the dugout with ice on his arm, he summons strength to go on, the film flashing back to compile a narrative of Billy Chapel’s life and career.

As the game progresses, the roar increases. Billy Chapel has been a nemesis for the Yankees and the fans are hostile, hurling insults in a cacophony of noise. Standing on the pitcher’s mound in New York was for any opposing pitcher, as Vin Scully (playing himself in the announcer role) says, the loneliest place in the world. Billy Chapel’s was a lonely and a loud calling.

For me, the most memorable line in the film is the oft-repeated mantra whispered by Billy to himself in the midst of the roar. Belligerent noise swirling about him as he stood lonely on the mound facing the batter, his arm and entire body aching more and more with each inning, loud enough to suffocate concentration, he whispers to himself, “*Clear the Mechanism.*” It’s a refrain which, through the years has become his mental trick for clearing his mind, blocking out the noise to achieve ultimate concentration on the batter at the plate.

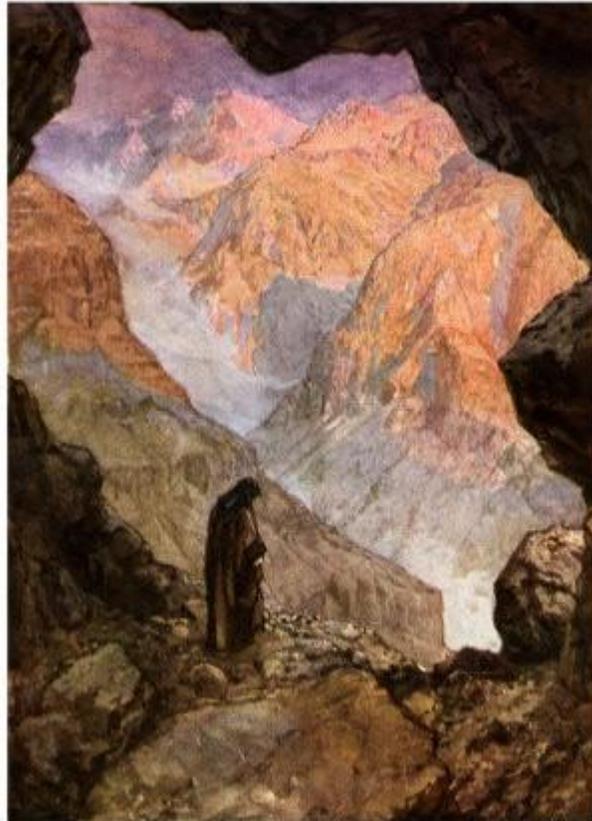
That’s when the film does an amazing thing. It lets us inside Billy’s head as the noise is muffled, the volume slowly turned down until it is as if Billy and the batter are alone on an island of silence. The camera allows us to see the raging crowd, waving arms and shouting insults, but we, with Billy Chapel, can no longer hear them. In his mind, and so in our watching, the roar is muted. Somehow, in the middle of Yankee stadium, Billy Chapel has found a *Chapel Midst the Roar*, hearing everything but nothing, a silence that is not the absence of noise, but the presence of something much deeper. A chapel is where you can hear something beating below your heart, a discovery of your essential self, and this film is about Billy Chapel finding that place.



No wonder the word *Chapel* and *Capella* emerge from the same root. In Italian, *alla capella* meant, “*in the manner of the chapel,*” thus, singing without accompaniment. In the film, Billy Chapel stood . . . alone . . . and heard the question Elijah heard in the Sinai, *What are doing here, Billy?* Pondering that question, he finds his core and knows the answer, that it’s time to retire, “*For Love of the Game.*”

In our Old Testament story, Elijah heard that question. Twice. “*What are you doing here, Elijah?*” Still ringing in his ears was the cacophonous noise of Mt. Carmel where he had so recently won a great victory, mowing down not just 27 batters, but the 450 prophets of Baal. That was yesterday. Today, the prophet has inexplicably run from the threats of Jezebel, and now in the quietness of the desert in the Negev, worn and weary, he still can discover no chapel in his head and heart. The roar continues – a roaring of fear, anger, guilt, shame. No ice pack could dull this pain of his heart and soul.

So he sleeps (as we often do when depressed). An angel comes and feeds him. Twice. Thus rested and fed, he summons strength for a forty day journey even deeper into the desert, all the way to *har ha-elohim* in the Sinai, the mountain of God. And there he hears the question, “*What are you doing here, Elijah?*” At first he’s self-defensive, a recognition of his lonely and loud calling as he says, “*I have been very zealous for the LORD. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life to take it.*”



This painting by the Scottish artist William Brassey Hole (1900) depicts

Elijah at the mouth of the cave on *har ha-elohim* (The Mount of God). I found it striking how the pose of the lonely prophet on the *Mount* was so similar the pose of Billy Chapel on the *Mound*.

At that cave Elijah experiences extraordinary sensory stimuli as God throws him a curve. This prophet was accustomed to the roar -- the fire from heaven consuming the sacrifice on Mt. Carmel and the wind and rain from the Mediterranean. Now, God throws a curve. The Hebrew text is patterned and hypnotic. The wind comes but, *lo be-ruach adonai* (*The Lord is not in the wind*). Then the roar of the earthquake but, *lo be-ra'ash adonai* (*the Lord is not in the quake*). Then the fire but, *lo be-esh adonai* (*the Lord was not in the fire*). The pattern is obvious:

Lo be-ruach Adonai
Lo be-ra'ash Adonai
Lo be-esh Adonai

Elijah, though, hears only the roar, until he is able to make out a “*still small voice.*” How can God be here, Elijah must have wondered, in this sound of sheer silence? For Elijah, it’s a *Clear the Mechanism* moment, so that he discovers a *Chapel Midst the Roar*, the soft sound of silence shimmering with unexpected depth.

Each of us experience moments in the swirl of life when we ask ourselves, “*What am I doing here?*” How then shall we find a *Chapel Midst the Roar*? When the swirling noise -- family issues, workplace stresses, financial pressures, health crises -- suffocates focus, we may ask ourselves, “*What am I doing here?*”

When I look back on my life, the moments that matter and sustain me, I see a series of chapels which become, often enough, *Chapels Midst the Roar*. I don’t speak here of sanctuaries made of brick and mortar, but of moments, intrusions into the ordinary, a breaking of routine when a calm settles unexpectedly so that something essential may be discovered, or rediscovered. In this place I am reminded what is real, before I give myself completely to what isn’t.

We are, in our living, beholden to the *Just Now*. What’s going on *Just Now*? We can’t ignore it, these challenges which are uniquely ours. Still, if I’ve learned anything as a pastor, particularly in a large church setting, it is that I can only write and speak about issues of the *Just Now* if my focus is on eternity. Our contextual relevancy to place and moment, space and time, must never be our absolute focus. More essential questions must guide us. As denominations struggle with societal issues of the culture in the *Just Now*, the noise of the culture can be difficult to find focus, to hear the question “*What are you doing here?*” in a way that leads us to rediscover the essentials of our spiritual core, to summon strength to continue.

Chapel moments remind us to be sure that what we are chasing is worth catching up with. (Sorry to end that sentence with a preposition, which I wouldn’t normally do, but sometimes transgression of grammar rules is just the curve that jars us into paying attention). To state it another way, “*Be careful what you wish for . . . you may just get it!*”

Well, we come now, *Just Now*, to this Holy Table for the sacrament. Let us be spiritually bold enough, approaching the table, to ask ourselves, “*What am I doing here?*”

Perhaps, like Elijah, you feel alone? Then come here to experience the presence of God in the community of the church.

Perhaps you come with a sense of guilt and shame? Come here, then, to experience forgiveness.

Or perhaps you come spiritually weary, lacking the fire and passion of an earlier moment in your Christian journey. Then hear Jesus’ words, “*Come unto me, all you who labor, and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*”

May the Lord bless each of us at this table to find a *Chapel Midst the Roar!*