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 herself, 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
יהיו השם יחיה אלוהים המתהלך בינן
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 קול, the sound\(^1\)

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

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\(^1\) 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

When God asks where they are, Adam actually says
I heard קול your voice, your sound in the garden God
And I was afraid אירא
[I was afraid because I was naked], and your sound scared me,
חאבה 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
אלהים מתהלל בנא
God was
not walking exactly but
The reflexive, causative of version of that verb to walk
מתהלל

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 בפ, 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
יִלְכוּ אֱלֹהִים מִתְהַלְּלָה בֵּין
God moving about in the garden, a moving that is ongoing, around, repetitive
We can see this same unusual verb מִתְהַלְֵ֥ל (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, 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.

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 hand\(^5\), That’s how close they all were.

\(^5\) Midrash Tanhuma Buber Chayeï 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,

אֶתְכֶֽם
וְאֵין־רוֹדֵ֥ף
וְנַסְתֶּ֖ם
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 \textit{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 \textit{parasha}
I do not believe it’s possible for even God to make us want to flee \textit{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 פולי
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
וְהָלָכְנֵּֽיכֶֽם
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.