

Fulfilling a lifelong dream of hearing Bob Dylan right here in Mobile

Updated Nov 22, 2016; Posted Nov 22, 2016

By Rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan, Springhill Avenue Temple, Mobile

From a very young age, I can remember hearing the even then gravelly voice of folk troubadour Bob Dylan. He was part of the landscape of 1970s New York, one of the singers whose music seemed everywhere. Of course, the songs that people mentioned most often in conversation were "Blowing in the Wind" and "The Times They Are A-Changing," which were fun to listen to, but also represented the need for societal change that adults around me were talking about.

I personally liked his song, "Like a Rolling Stone," although I was a bit confused about whether he was referring to the rock group of that name, but I marvelled at how his words kind of flowed in an almost jarring and yet magnetizing rhythm. Last summer, I was amazed to read that "Like a Rolling Stone" had been recorded fifty years earlier.

It was like a dream come true to be able to go to the Saenger Theater off of Dauphin Street in downtown Mobile, Alabama, to hear Dylan live and in-person. I didn't go primarily because of my love of his music, although I do like almost everything he has sung in both his early and later phases (although not in the middle). Rather, it was primarily to take advantage of the opportunity to see a legend in person when such a possibility still exists. I guess I was quite shaken by the somewhat sudden death of Leonard Cohen, another American Jewish singer-songwriter.

In contrast to Dylan, I somehow--I'm almost embarrassed to confess this--had never heard of the guy until just a couple of years ago. So, unfortunately, it was only in retrospect that I read that his business manager had spent all his money and he had had to go back on the road for several years of touring in order to replenish his retirement fund. While I had been living in Jamaica in the Caribbean for the past number of years, there surely would have been opportunities to find myself in a place where I could have attended one of his concerts. And now, it was too late.

With that very much in mind, when I heard that there were tickets for sale I jumped at the opportunity without hesitation. All the tickets were sold out of course, but there was a ticket sales consolidator who had an easy-to-use website that a friend was able to access and complete the transaction in just a few seconds. Dylan did not disappoint.

My friend, Michael Brown, had told me that he would play mostly American classics and especially Frank Sinatra, and this was true but only partially so. He threw in an assortment of his own songs, including a somewhat rearranged version of "Highway 61," one of the many songs that intrigued me as I grew a bit older and began to see how he was interspersing traditional Jewish themes with contemporary American stories. His retelling of the sacrifice of Abraham was not so much profound as amusing:

Oh, God said to Abraham, "Kill me a son"
Abe says, "Man you must be puttin' me on"
God says, "No", Abe say "What?"
God say "You can do what you want Abe but
The next time you see me comin' you better run"

This did not have the feel or the substance of a great philosopher of religion, but there was something catchy and enduring about his retelling of the biblical tale. If he had just stopped at that point, then, as we say at the Passover seder, "Dayenu," but then the song turns in a completely different direction: "Georgia Sam had a bloody nose." There are many interpretations possible and that's what intrigued me about the Dylan that I discovered as an adult. It wasn't just catchy tunes and a funny drawl that could captivate my attention, but the potential to delve into lyrical interpretation.

The problem was that it was frequently difficult or even impossible to decipher what Dylan actually meant in many of his more interesting compositions. Sometimes, you had to fall back on anecdotes that people might tell to visiting journalists that might or might not be true. In the case of "Highway 61," there was a story circulating that he wrote the song in the aftermath of a very serious car crash that he had been involved in on, of course, Highway 61. But, perhaps the lyrics are entirely symbolic. U.S. Route 61 is a very long highway that runs 1,400 miles from New Orleans to Wyoming, Minnesota, and was one of the more important north-south roads before the interstate highway system was built. In his memoirs, he wrote, "Highway 61, the main thoroughfare of the country blues, begins about where I began. I always felt like I'd started on it, always had been on it and could go anywhere, even down in to the deep Delta country. It was the same road, full of the same contradictions, the same one-horse towns, the same spiritual ancestors ... It was my place in the universe, always felt like it was in my blood."

I kind of like that quote because it encapsulates what is so fascinating about Dylan for me. Dylan has been able to draw on his Jewish roots, but at the same time to explore eclectic forms of American spirituality that he's been able to make his own. He may not exactly be a biblical prophet but he represents a synthesis of Jewish and American values that has produced something both original and meaningful.