(Not Entirely) New World Rituals

Yermiyahu Ahron Taub

The woman answering the phone knows my voice, can anticipate my request. And yet I make no effort to change that request in any way, to step away from the well-worn path. Still, with a pause, gentle, almost tender, in its solicitousness, she waits for me to say: "One steamed veggie egg roll and steamed tofu with mixed veggies and brown rice." Without ever having studied the choreography or even so much as glanced at the libretto, each of us knows the steps prescribed to us in this dance, this bonsai waltz. We never glide outside the white-scalding lines. We never introduce ourselves. We never step past the briefest of pleasantries. We cannot. We must not. We wouldn't dare.

And when I enter from my 'journey' from down the street, she waves at me from the back, as her son(?), now a young man after these many years – completes the transaction up front. On my return home from her establishment (or at least the one from where she answers the phone), I think I vow that I will try something different – fare from another place, another culture. I think to myself: "It's not Christmas day, after all, and I won't be going to the cinema." Why shouldn't I voyage forth to other shores?

Only I head upstairs. From the cupboard, I remove the stoneware plate decorated with an orange and red rooster gifted to me by a friend who joined the Hare Krishnas. Slice of a set that never fails to provide cheer. Just as its donor once never failed to, either. Carefully, I remove the veggie egg roll from the wax paper. I scoop out the brown rice from the white cardboard container on which a red structure has been printed. A house? A temple? Though not manna from the heavens, I savor each mouthful. Instead of leftover *tsholnt* or gefilte fish, here is this sustenance that no longer elicits surprise yet remains only partially known. Conceived from afar, created here. Cherished here, too.

What were the steps that brought us both, she and me, to this street that never quite 'turns the corner'? I'll never know. Even my own path, let alone hers. I place the paper materials carefully in the recycling bag. Without a road map, without a specific blessing such as the ones I used to recite with full intent, such as the ones whose laws I had to memorize for *berakhot*/blessing bees, there is a ritual to this practice. In the way I make sure every grain of brown rice is eaten. This is the fruit of the determination of the voyagers, the uprooted, the displaced, and the generations that follow. It has to be.

Even as I phrase my question, I have learned to step away from answers. The signposts flash by, but my eyes look down, focusing on the water now running down into the mounds of soap suds. I won't register for the genealogists' convention. The water is turning cold. The yellow dishwasher gloves flash unused from the left-hand corner of the counter. I dry the plate with the orange and red rooster, and my hands, crimson from the water, violet with trepidation, face the new week ahead. The red structure creaks under the weight of my night. One of its roof tiles loosens beneath the gales of my breath.

Her voice will light the way.



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