

Hard Times Come Again No More

This week, instead of reflecting on a song from the book of Psalms, I want to present one from the Stephen Foster songbook. The author of so many American folksongs, including “Camptown Ladies,” “Swanee River,” and “Oh, Susanna!,” Foster captured the spirit of the country: young and idealistic, but already (in the mid 19th century) divided, with some people experiencing deep troubles. It should not be surprising that his songs may also be read through the lens of our own situation to find meaning, strength, and hope. “*Hard Times Come Again No More*” is a cry for help in the style of the Biblical laments, but also a beautiful call for solidarity with those less fortunate.

1.

Let us pause in life's pleasures and count its many tears,
While we all sup sorrow with the poor;
There's a song that will linger forever in our ears;
Oh! Hard times come again no more.

Chorus:

'Tis the song, the sigh of the weary,
Hard Times, hard times, come again no more.
Many days you have lingered around my cabin door;
Oh! Hard times come again no more.

2.

While we seek mirth and beauty and music light and gay,
There are frail forms fainting at the door;
Though their voices are silent, their pleading looks will say
Oh! Hard times come again no more.

Chorus

3.

There's a pale drooping maiden who toils her life away,
With a worn heart whose better days are o'er:
Though her voice would be merry, 'tis sighing all the day,
Oh! Hard times come again no more.

Chorus

4.

'Tis a sigh that is wafted across the troubled wave,
'Tis a wail that is heard upon the shore
'Tis a dirge that is murmured around the lowly grave
Oh! Hard times come again no more.

Chorus

The song – and indeed our Jewish tradition – demands that we be aware that there is much suffering in our world. We all know intellectually that there are people who do not have enough

to eat, who do not have a safe place to sleep, who cannot afford to clothe themselves, who are at risk of violence and who are particularly susceptible to contracting a disease. And, unfortunately, during the coronavirus pandemic, most of us know someone who has become sick and who cannot breathe without assistance. But our intellectual awareness is often disconnected from our emotional awareness – our empathy. In every example of suffering that this song identifies – hunger, failing health, overwork, and death – we are asked to do something about it. The refrain, “Hard times come again no more,” is a prayer on behalf of the suffering, but the singer is not such a person. We, in our privilege, are asked through the song to feel what they feel, so that we cannot cry out “Hard times come again no more” without stepping up to do something. *We* need to ensure that such hard times will in fact not come again.

During the Civil War, soldiers wrote a parody of this song in which they complain about their food. “Hard Tack Come Again No More!” is an utterly silly song, and, in a way, it seems demeaning to the value of the original to discuss the parody in the same breath. On the other hand, it is equally poignant in this zeitgeist. In the song, the soldiers complain about the rations they are given until their commanding officer gives in and changes the food from hard tack (think about matzah but harder to bite through) to corn meal mush. The soldiers immediately begin singing, “Hard tack come again once more!” This parody illustrates a “careful what you wish for” message. Back before the pandemic, we let work govern our lives so much that we could not wait for time off. Now, most of us have more time off than we know what to do with, and all we want is to go back to work. What tragic irony!

Both versions of Stephen Foster’s song impact us where we are now, I hope. They each describe an aspect of how we respond in this crisis. Please remember, however, how fortunate we are indeed to be able to complain both about how much we work and how much we want to work. Please remember that and consider those who are not so fortunate.