THE DARK SIDE OF THE MOON

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In Nicholas Kristof's column last weekend in the New York Times about Henry Kissinger, who died two weeks ago, Kristof grapples with Kissinger's sprawling legacy as the most influential arbiter of statecraft in the post-World War II era. Kissinger saw opportunities others couldn't see, which ultimately led to the opening of China to the West, signing an arms control agreement with Russia, and negotiating a peace treaty between Egypt and Israel. Kissinger was a master of great power politics.

Tragically, and perhaps criminally, Kissinger mostly ignored nations and peoples who weren't great powers, seeing them as pawns to be sacrificed in the global conflict among superpowers. Vietnam, Cambodia, Bangladesh, East Timor — Kissinger either orchestrated or was complicit in the death of hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians. From this perspective, Kristof says, "Kissinger doesn't look like a foreign policy genius, but like a bumbling American who never understood the lives of people he shrugged at slaughtering."

In important ways, the Middle East of today has been constructed on a template designed by Kissinger. Pay attention to the great powers and ignore everyone else. What Kissinger failed to see — and what ultimately proved his great powers approach inadequate — is that the nationalist aspirations of less dominant peoples will continue to roil and fester until they are somehow satisfied.

In Kristof's column several days ago about Gaza being the most dangerous place in the world to be a child, he notes that 70% of the people who have been killed in Gaza have been women and children. In an observation that captures both the Kissinger approach to foreign policy and the view of many people today concerning the Gaza war, Kristof says, "Too many see events through a prism in which lives are invaluable on one side while deaths on the other are regrettable."

Last Sunday, I returned from a week in Israel and Palestine. I spent time in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, as well as in Nazareth, the largest Palestinian majority town in Israel. Because my visit partially overlapped with the cease-fire, I was able to travel south to Kibbutz Alumim, which lies in the shadow of Gaza City. It's one of the kibbutzim attacked by Hamas terrorists on October 7.

Kibbutz Alumim is primarily an avocado farm and a large dairy operation – the most technologically advanced dairy in Israel. The director of security for the kibbutz showed me around and described to me how terrorists had entered through a fence at the industrial end of the kibbutz. They burned some of the barns and farming equipment, and massacred the Thai and Nepalese workers who were housed in

dormitories near the barns. Even though the terrorists roamed freely on the kibbutz for five hours until the Israeli Defense forces showed up, the terrorists inexplicably did not venture into the residential end of the kibbutz, where three hundred inhabitants were sheltering in safe rooms in their homes. Given what happened at other kibbutzim, no one knows why the homes at Kibbutz Alumim and the people in them were spared.

After showing me where these events took place on the kibbutz, the director of security then took me down into the underground command bunker. He showed me surveillance videos of what had happened, including the terrorists' attack of some of the people who were fleeing from the massacre at the music festival. Five hours is a long time to wait while terrorists are roaming freely and killing casually, almost gleefully. While none of the women at Kibbutz Alumim were raped, we now know the full horror of what Hamas did elsewhere.

For my part, I cannot understand how anyone can respond to the savage butchery perpetrated by Hamas with anything but the strongest possible denunciation. Having sat with Jews in Israel whose loved ones were killed or captured, or whose loved ones are now fighting in Gaza, I understand their deeply-felt trauma and their deep-seated desire to obliterate Hamas.

I have also sat with Palestinians, who know all too well the anguish that comes when loved ones and family members are indiscriminately captured or killed. In a meeting ten days ago with four professors in Israel, two of them Palestinian and two of them Jewish, one of the Palestinian professors expressed anguish at the fact that the Jewish response to October 7 had completely ignored the experience of Palestinians over the past 75 years.

Or, as Kristof put it, "Too many see events through a prism in which lives are invaluable on one side while deaths on the other are regrettable."

Fifty years ago, in the fall of 1973, Egypt and Syria made a surprise attack against Israel precipitating a conflict now known as the Yom Kippur War — a war that Israel won decisively. In retaliation, Arab oil producing nations imposed an oil embargo on nations that supported Israel, tripling oil prices and plunging stock markets into the worst crash since the Great Depression. The resulting period of high unemployment and high inflation in the US, now known as stagflation, further unsettled a nation already reeling from cultural restlessness and political chaos.

Earlier in 1973, Henry Kissinger had flown to Paris to sign the accords that would end America's misadventure in Southeast Asia, during which casualties in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos numbered in the millions. Also in 1973, members of President Richard Nixon's inner circle were convicted in the break-in of the Watergate Hotel, initiating a sequence of events which would lead Nixon to declare that "I am not a crook" and force him to resign a year later.

In September 1973, I turned sixteen. My parents gave me a used car for my birthday and told me that I was on my own to do with my life whatever I chose. The car

was an excellent vehicle — a 1967 Ford Mustang — but it seemed woefully inadequate as a means of navigating a chaotic and uncertain world.

My parents had tried their best to map the world for me, which meant being obedient to the commands of the Bible during this life as a means of preparing for eternity in the next life. As the Mennonites of my upbringing often said, “God said it, I believe it, and that settles it.” Except that the more I learned about the world around me, the more unsettled I felt.

As many of you know, I grew up Conservative Mennonite, a tradition not unlike Orthodox Judaism in its commitment to an austere way of life. Our family life was relatively cloistered — well insulated from the impact of the broader culture. My parents didn't get a television until after I left home, and the radio was never on except for news headlines and the weather forecast.

Several years before I received the Mustang, I had purchased a small transistor radio with money I had saved from mowing lawns and delivering newspapers. It was just the right size for illicit listening late at night under cover of blankets and a pillow. My radio changed my world. While everyone else slept, I twirled the dial, sampling various musical options. For the first year or two, I would usually land on a country music station.

Two songs by Johnny Cash quickly became an obsession. One was an anthem of alienated adolescence titled “What is Truth?” Somehow its refrain rang true for me too: “And the lonely voice of youth cries: ‘What is Truth?’” The other song was “Sunday Morning Coming Down,” about someone waking up lonely on a city sidewalk one Sunday morning and wishing he hadn't prepared for the day by getting sober.

By the time I turned 16 in 1973 (the year of the Ford Mustang), my musical preferences had transitioned from country music to rock ‘n’ roll. In March of that year, Pink Floyd released their album “The Dark Side of the Moon,” which would spend 14 years on the best-selling album charts and become the eighth best-selling album of all time. The album takes the darkness of life — the feelings of loneliness, alienation, even despair — and refracts them in a way that makes them accessible, perhaps manageable, and maybe even in some way beautiful. As New York Times music critic John Pareles puts it, “The early 1970’s were a time when the utopian promises of the hippie era were fading, pushed back by entrenched interests and corporate co-optation. ‘Dark Side’ captures naïve hopes falling away.”

Fifty years later, the same dynamic seems underway — naïve hopes falling away, the dark side returning. A decade ago, with a Black American in the White House and gay marriage made legal, among other advances, many of us thought that progress would continue. Instead, especially since the election of Donald Trump in 2016, a retrograde motion has set in. Civil rights, gay rights, women’s rights, economic equality, environmental justice — the promises of progress seem to be fading. With frustration and anxiety on the rise, established structures of meaning — cultural, educational, and even religious — seem to be savaging themselves everywhere.

For me as a 16-year-old struggling to reconcile the simplistic world of my upbringing with the chaos and uncertainty of the life that then stretched out before me, the music and lyrics of Dark Side felt comforting, even reassuring. Today, fifty years later, the music feels the same — wrestling with the darkness in a way that feels unafraid and unapologetic.

In the song "Breathe," we find reassurance that this life is the only one that matters.

> Breathe, breathe in the air
> Don't be afraid to care
> Leave, but don't leave me
> Look around and choose your own ground
> For long you live and high you fly
> And smiles you'll give and tears you'll cry
> And all you touch and all you see
> Is all your life will ever be

If that's the case — if all we touch and all we see is all our lives will ever be — then we better get on with the business of living, because this life will be over sooner than we think. We hear urgency in the song "Time."

> Ticking away the moments that make up a dull day
> You fritter and waste the hours in an offhand way
> Kicking around on a piece of ground in your hometown
> Waiting for someone or something to show you the way
>
> Tired of lying in the sunshine, staying home to watch the rain
> You are young and life is long and there is time to kill today
> And then one day you find ten years have got behind you
> No one told you when to run, you missed the starting gun
>
> And you run, and you run to catch up with the sun, but it's sinking
> And racing around to come up behind you again
> The sun is the same in a relative way, but you're older
> Shorter of breath and one day closer to death

The convictions in these words bolstered my own emerging sense as a teenager that this life is the only one that matters, and I better get busy living it, because it will be over before I know it. Today, the words continue to resound for all of us, as we wrestle with the darkness in our time.

The other songs on the album grapple with the disappointment, despondency, and despair that inevitably come our way as we run through life. It's possible to view Dark Side as a masterfully symphonic acquiescence to the ultimate darkness of life. After all, the album ends with a song titled "Eclipse."

> All that you touch
> All that you see
> All that you taste
> All you feel
> All that you love
> All that you hate
> All you distrust
> All you save
> All that you give
> All that you deal
> All that you buy, beg, borrow, or steal
> All you create
> All you destroy
> And all that you do
> All that you say
> All that you eat, everyone you meet
> All that you slight, everyone you fight
> All that is now and all that is gone
> All that's to come, and everything under the sun is in tune
> But the sun is eclipsed by the moon

Despite leaving us in the middle of an eclipse, the album doesn't ultimately leave us in the dark. The artwork on the album cover of light being refracted through a prism into a rainbow conveys a more hopeful message, which the final image of an eclipse reinforces. The light of the sun may sometimes be eclipsed by the moon, plunging us into the dark. But an eclipse is a passing phase of cosmic life. The light will inevitably return, when once again everything under the sun will be in tune — that is, in the lyric universe of the album, harmonically and existentially connected.

As it happens, that's the message of the Jewish celebration of Hanukkah, which began on Friday evening at sundown. The light of the Hanukkah menorah, with one candle burning for each of eight days, symbolizes the eventual triumph of light over darkness, and of freedom over tyranny.

Even though the war in Gaza has plunged the Middle East into the darkness of yet another moral and humanitarian eclipse, ample reasons remain to believe that light will eventually return. Nicholas Kristof concludes his column about Henry Kissinger by asking what we can learn in the aftermath of Kissinger's death. Kristof says, "In the

Middle East, perhaps a lesson is that Palestinian nationalist aspirations for statehood will fester until they are realized and that "war for peace" (as Kissinger termed it, or as Benjamin Netanyahu applies it) consumes lives without actually advancing peace."

Kristof concludes, "Yet there's also a lesson about seeing hope even in the darkest times, of having the imagination to see ten moves ahead how warring parties might someday exhaust themselves and be ready to shake hands. That means trying relentlessly to put pieces in place even in the bleakest moments, as Kissinger did painstakingly during and after the Yom Kippur War, so that eventually a path to peace might emerge from the fog."

As people of faith, we believe light will return after even the darkest night and hope can be renewed even in the bleakest moments. Our responsibility is to relentlessly put in place the building blocks of a future that can be better than the present. While fully acknowledging the travesties of the past and the travails of the present, we believe in possibilities yet to come — possibilities for truth in our day, and justice in our time, and peace in our world.