

“And the painted ponies go up and down”:

Making sense of death . . . or not

Almost 60 years ago, Joni Mitchell wrote the lyrics of what would become one of the most well-known songs of all time, The Circle Game.

You know the words really well . . .

Please join with Cantor in the refrain:

And the seasons they go round and round

And the painted ponies go up and down

We're captive on the carousel of time

We can't return, we can only look

Behind from where we came

And go round and round and round

In the circle game.

Besides the beautiful melody, the lyrics that always grab me are the ones that speak of painted ponies going up and down, noting that we are all captive on the carousel of time.

In other words, all of life is a constant movement, ups and downs, ascending and descending, opposite forces pulling us in one direction, then another. The only constant is the ride itself which is always in a state of flux.

My dear friends, my CKT family, this past year has been one of the most challenging of years for me personally as well as for my family. As many of you know, in a span of 3 weeks, we lost one of our dearest friends, Patti Cohen-Hecht, our dog Bear of 13 years, and then on

June 15th my beloved mother. Then shortly thereafter we travelled to San Diego to visit with my friend, colleague and mentor who installed me as Rabbi on this Bimah 16 years ago, and 3 others as well before Kol Tikvah, Rabbi Jonathan Stein, who is battling pancreatic cancer.

Talk about the feeling of loss, the enormity of existential angst, the sense of human vulnerability, the sadness that pains the heart and sears the soul. At times it all seems so incomprehensible. The weight of unanswered questions regarding the human condition when one must face the final curtain all but crushed my zest for life.

To put it bluntly, this year, more than any other, I had to personally come to terms with death. This year all my Rabbinic knowledge and pastoral experience notwithstanding, I was forced to try and make sense of so much sorrow, suffering and sadness which unsettles the thin veneer that separates our longing for perceived permanence from the random blows that assail us, reminding us of our vulnerability. With so much personal loss staring me in the face, I yearned ever so much to come to terms with it, to make sense of it, to ease my angst of it by neatly folding all my questions into intellectual frameworks which explain the unexplainable.

After struggling mightily with these feelings, I soon came to realize there are no neat little

boxes to pack away my pain and sorrow so that it all makes sense. Maybe it doesn't have to.

In our liturgy the haunting words which spiritually startle us year by year, who shall live and who shall die, who shall live long and who shall die young, who will be rich and who will be poor, who will be tranquil and who will be driven – these I have come to realize are not questions. It's not about the who, because the "who" is all of us. The real thrust of these words is that these couplets of seeming opposites are really one and the same, in fact they are both.

Perhaps the human conundrum is just that, the human paradox is not an "either/or" but rather a "both/and".

For example, I love to say “I have an opinion, but I don’t agree with it”. On the face of it this statement seems totally illogical. How can both be true at the same time? And yet if we are honest aren’t there times when we may hold an opinion about something, but question the veracity of this opinion at the same time.

For example, “I am of the opinion that people can never change who they are, but maybe they can” or “I am of the opinion that opposites attract”, but maybe they don’t.

It is possible to hold 2 contradictory thoughts as one, because the only thing consistent in life is inconsistency. The only constant in life is change.

This past year, I presided at a funeral of an 89-year-old man. In his eulogy, the son, Robert, quipped that his father's favorite sayings were: "If you happen to be a little sick, it's okay as long as you have your health" and "if you are dying, it's okay, as long as you have your life".

We laugh at the absurdity of these statements and yet I would claim they speak volumes about what really matters in life and what helps us make sense of our human finitude. That is to say that the ebb and flow of our lives is a dance between two extremes, but the middle is where real life is lived or like an ocean, between low tide and high tide is where we sail. If we think about life as a football metaphor, the end zones represent life and

death, but the movement back and forth in between goal posts is where the action takes place. Success and failure, sickness and health, wholeness and brokenness, inner peace and inner angst, one's sexual orientation and gender fluidity, life and death, these and many more "goal posts" are only artificial markers we erect to frame the fluidity of our lives. In fact, perhaps these markers which we as humans devise to measure a span, are really illusory. Can sickness and health exist as one? Can wholeness and brokenness exist side by side? Can life and death be one and the same? I would claim that in fact they often do, and so they must as our tradition teaches.

A midrash tells us that after Moses shattered the 10 commandments after witnessing the apostasy of the Israelites worshipping a golden calf, the broken shards were gathered up and

saved piece by piece. Then when the new tablets were revealed, we are told that the broken ones and the whole ones were placed side by side in the Aron, the ark of the covenant. Why? To remind us that both the broken and the whole are holy, that both the broken and whole exist as one just as they do inside of us, both at the same time. At any given time, we have so much to be grateful for and yet so much that is lacking – we can be happy about some things but sad about others. They both emanate from the same heavenly source; only one is in pieces, while the other is whole.

Another teaching from our Chasidic tradition also establishes this principle of co-mingling of disparate parts that speak of oneness.

We are told to keep two pieces of paper in each of our pockets. On one piece is written that we are but dust and ashes; on the other that we are created in the divine image.

On days when we think little of ourselves, when we feel small and insignificant, we are to remember that we are worthy, we are valuable as we are created B'tzelem Elohim, in God's image. On other days when we are over-impressed with ourselves, our ego is out of whack, we should remember the paper in the other pocket that reminds us we are ultimately but dust and ashes. In other words, we are both at the same time; we live in a continuum of emotions which co-exist within each of us.

When we consider fame and fortune and power, we recognize that all of these desirable goals are fleeting, and also come with competing costs which extract a price.

With fame comes a loss of anonymity, with fortune comes the constant fear of losing what you have gained and the insatiable desire for more, and with power comes the corrupting abuses that often creates an illusion of invincibility.

To be sure our faith does not deny us the pursuit of fame, fortune and power; but it also forces us to recognize that in the scheme of life nothing exists in a vacuum.

The ying and yang of life is seen also in nature itself. While in Iceland this summer, just days

after the end of Shiva for my mother, Linda and I were awestruck repeatedly by the grandeur of creation marked by towering mountains, glistening glaciers, shimmering fjords, molten lava, gushing geysers, powerful waterfalls and active volcanoes. The sheer natural beauty was matched only by the realization of the eternal majesty which reminds us of things everlasting. I found a sense of peace recognizing that although we are just spectators passing by, we find our spiritual permanence in seeing ourselves as part of the eternal wonders of creation. Perhaps God's plan is to have us drawn to natural beauty to help us know that like things eternal so is the soul, that which lives long after we die. In our prayers the liturgist wrote long ago _____.

How awesome are your works, oh God, your designs are very deep, the earth is full of your bounties.

So while I found a sense of peace in nature in pondering my mortality, I also realized the immortality of the soul in other ways as well.

Simply put they are Masoret, K'hillah, and Emunah tradition, community and faith.

Observing the rituals of Jewish mourning, such as Kriyah, Shivah, Shloshim and Kaddish, I felt connected to my heritage and my people like never before. Reciting kaddish daily, knowing that these words have bound heaven to earth for over 2,000 years is powerful and healing.

Being surrounded by family, friends and our CKT community reminded me that I was not alone; that true love and caring is the balm that

heals a broken heart and a soul laden with grief. And faith, the ability to let go and let God, to see the larger picture of life and not just the narrow perspective of one who mourns a personal loss, to see and sense the totality of existence with all its contradictions and inconsistencies, is to accept death as part of life, the painted ponies that go up and down, captive on the carousel of life, the carousel of time.

As I near my conclusion, I return to the wisdom of Robert, who quoted his father, "If you are dying, it's okay, as long as you have your life." This is best represented here in Florida when you really behold the wonder of the palm tree. Look carefully and you will see that even before its branches eventually turn brown and break

loose, growing out of its top already is a new shoot, ready to spread its leaves, fresh and green. Both the brown branch and the green shoot are one and the same, part of the same tree of life.

Even as we are dying, so we are living each and every day. From the day we are born to the day we die our cells die off and reproduce in an endless cycle. What was can never be again, or as the song admonishes “we can’t return, we can only look behind from where we came and go round and round and round in the circle game.”

In conclusion, I leave you with a poem by Rich Orloff which truly sums up what I’ve learned in trying to make sense of death:

“A Prayer to Embrace the Mystery”

By Rich Orloff

As I try to figure things out,

A soft voice whispers to me:

Accept the mystery of life

Accept the mystery of other people

Accept the mystery of you

Accept the mystery of God

*Understanding can be an impediment to
wisdom*

Understanding is the ego refusing to surrender

*Understanding is only sometimes an antidote to
fear*

*Understanding demands that life be
understandable*

You can have a relationship

Not of understanding but of awe

*You can either stay trapped in the illusion of
knowledge*

Or move freely in the dance of full existence

I pray for the strength to

Embrace the mystery and let go

I pray for the courage to recognize

It's time for the soul to be set free

On this day of atonement may our souls be set free to embrace the totality of existence and in so doing find inner peace.