

Rabbi Jodi Kornfeld

Living with Paradox

Today's Torah portion is from Genesis 7 retelling the story of Noah and the flood. It is the second biblical flood story, coming after Genesis 6. Every culture has a flood story and this is ours. Even within Genesis 7 there are variations, specifically where the kinds and numbers of animals brought onto the ark are concerned. The inclusion of both stories and their internal inconsistencies reflect different oral traditions, and different biblical writers, that the biblical editor drew upon when compiling the text; and likely further reflects either poor editing or the desire to be as inclusive as possible for the emerging Israelitic nation. Regardless of which version is considered, the story is a familiar one and one that has been transformed in our collective memories as a sweet story of animals, a boat and a rainbow. Indeed an entire industry has grown up around the image of smiling animals out to sea, populating decorations for the walls and shelves of children's rooms, bookshelves of various children's storybooks on the subject, and even a kind of biblical naivete about the text. But in reality the truth is never that simple. Instead I want to explore with you this morning the metaphors contained in the story and the lessons we can apply to our lives in the coming months.

The text of Genesis 7 tells us in verse 2 that there were seven and

seven of every clean beast and of the beasts that are not clean two [and two], each with his mate; of the fowl also of the air, seven and seven, male and female; and in verse 8-9, “of clean beasts, and of beasts that are not clean, and of fowls, and of every thing that creeps upon the ground, there went in two and two unto Noah into the ark, male and female.” For those of you who are interested in an explanation lest you spend the next few minutes trying to figure it out, the extra “clean” beasts in the former were supplied by a priestly author so as to have enough animals for sacrifice. The inconsistencies are less important than the total number of animals brought on the ark. For you see, in biblical times, there were over 150 species of animals in the land of Palestine. From various verses and stories in the Bible, we know that these included donkeys, apes, bears, snakes, eagles, deer, fox, frogs, gazelles, goats, sheep, rabbits, cattle, horses, leopards, lions, doves and ravens, to name a few. Yet they were all on the same vessel: the hunters and the hunted; the large and the small. Why didn’t the predators eat their prey? How did the large carnivores not consume the small ones? It is in these questions that the story of Noah and the ark metaphorically holds the message that I want to share with you today. The answers can guide us to achieving emotional health and great meaning in the coming year.

Our lives are filled with paradox and ambivalence. We live in the tension of opposites harmonizing them to the best of our abilities. Ambivalence does not mean indecision; it is not a characteristic of inability to function.

Emotional and psychological opposites unlike physical attributes such as short and tall are not mutually exclusive. They co-exist both at the same time as well as successively. Life is both happy *and* sad; joy *and* sorrow; triumph *and* defeat. It is not one or the other. The capacity to experience both, acknowledge both, and embrace both make us human. We each are the ark holding these things simultaneously and it is how we navigate the simultaneity that marks our humanity. In other words, without their emotional counterparts, the paradox is incomplete and so are our lives. We do not live entirely in light nor entirely in shadow. We live fully and fully live in the interplay of the two. Indeed as light changes, so do the shadows taking on new shapes and sizes; shadow truly needs light to exist. And we are right to reject the façade of exclusiveness of only one. F. Scott Fitzgerald said, “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.” To which it would be appropriate to add it is also the test of a first rate emotionally grounded mind. It recognizes that we live in the conjunctive rather than the disjunctive. We each need to cultivate the habit

of living a life of “yes, and” rather than “no, but.” The acceptance of contradiction and paradox is essential to our well-being. Holding the paradox is not dishonest, deceptive or disingenuous. Nor is it about outward appearances versus inward feelings. Instead it is embracing a life that is one grand paradox, neither linear nor circular. It is the psychological and emotional realization of the verse in Isaiah 11:6 where the wolf lives with the lamb, and the leopard lies down with the goat, and the calf and the lion and the yearling together. In short where the ark is full, not fully unruly.

At Rosh Hashanah, we traditionally wish each other a shanah tovah, a good year. This is in sharp contradistinction to the secular new year where we wish one another a happy new year. The wisdom of our tradition recognizes that a good year will bring the full gamut of experiences and emotions; that a good year will bring challenges some of us thought we would never have to or be able to endure but we do with the support of family, friends and community; that a good year will mean an entire range of feelings that leave us changed, hopefully for the better, at year’s end; and that a good year will mean we have successfully navigated that simultaneity of contradictions. Writing in the Chicago Tribune, columnist Heidi Stevens noted that she is “melancholy and . . . blissful, often at the same time.” And she wrote, “I understand that you can experience all sorts of emotions at

once. It doesn't make you contradictory. It makes you human. What if I could teach my kids to embrace this truth at an early age? What if I could help them feel just as comfortable with sadness and disappointment as they do with glee and joy?" This does not mean that we wish sadness and disappointment on our children or others. Instead it is an honest assessment of a life lived well, and a life filled with meaning. Recent research from Stanford University examined happiness and meaningfulness. It found, "happiness without meaning is characterized by a relatively shallow and often self-oriented life, in which things go well, needs and desires are easily satisfied, and difficult or taxing entanglements are avoided." (Stanford Report, by Clifton Parker, January 1, 2014) It went on, "the meaningful life guides actions from the past through the present to the future, giving one a sense of direction. It offers ways to value good and bad alike, and gives us justifications for our aspirations. From achieving our goals to regarding ourselves in a positive light, a life of meaningfulness is considerably different than mere happiness."

The recent Pixar movie, *Inside Out* about an 11-year old girl named Riley, exemplifies this message in artistic form. The range of emotions of the protagonist co-exist in "headquarters," with each taking the helm at various times. The emotions psychologist behind the film, Dacher Keltner,

puts it this way: “we have a naive view in the West that happiness is all about the positive stuff. But happiness in a meaningful life is really about the full array of emotions, and finding them in the right place. I think that is a subtext of the movie: The parents want Riley to just be their happy little girl. And she can’t. She has to have this full complement of emotions to develop. I think we all need to remember that. . . . You need sadness, you need anger, you need fear.” (psmag.com, July 8, 2015) I would add that embracing this truth is a gift; it is a gift we give each other and pass on to the next generation. The rains stop; the flood recedes. All the animals come off the ark, in tact, uneaten by those foreboding and larger ones surrounding them. Contradictions need not result in chaos. We each have the ability, the very human ability to embrace the contradictions; to live in the interstices of apparently conflicting feelings; and to travel the intersections of our lives. We can choose to recognize this, making our own personal promise at Rosh Hashanah to have a good year filled with both challenges and accomplishments. We can say truthfully to ourselves, I am happy and I am sad; I have joy and I have sorrow, at one and the same time. Our lives are full. Without the juxtaposition of emotions and the jostling for position that may come with them at any one time, none of them can have any real meaning. Our ability to discern and discriminate between them, and to

accept the paradoxes that are our lives, shows that we are doing the very real work of living.

For you see, equilibrium does return. We do not dwell persistently at one emotional end or the other if we are honest with ourselves. In her book Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics, Rachel Adler reminds us of the preference for goodness and the resilience sometimes needed to get there. She writes in particular reference to one of the seven blessings offered at a wedding, “Blessing triumphs over inexorable suffering and sorrow, proclaiming the inevitability of joy. . . . Joy heals us by making us new.” Life shows a preference for happiness and connection, tempered by experience. It is better for us psychologically, socially and emotionally but it does not function solo. So let us work to have a good year: a year in which we enjoy happiness and accept its partner sadness; a year that is marked with successes, made sweeter by the accompanying failures; a year that is characterized by optimism and realism. In short, let us have a year that is filled with what makes us human and frames the meaning that comes from life. Take it all on the ark. Take it all in.