



Cycles and Peace of Mind - Vayechi

Life means change. Repetitious change. Witness the four seasons and then remember how the earth continues to spin on its axis. You will sit down to eat dinner tonight with relish, even though you had your fill yesterday.

We live with cycles but tend not to notice the continuity of change. At some acute moment of awareness we will recognize we have gained momentum and that we are on the up, and life is a rose-garden. At some other time, we may find ourselves lapsing, stuck, or even pushed back, and life seems to have less in it than it did yesterday.

The tendency to fixate on the moment seems hard wired. Manuals are discarded when the machine works swimmingly and all the pieces slot right into place and nobody worries about a hangover while the party's in full swing. In times of emergency, the good times will be forgotten and calls for help urgently made.

In tough economic times, what's the trick to keeping your balance?

There is a tale told about King Solomon, who was said to possess a small gold ring that possessed magical powers. Somehow, it always calmed him down. When the king felt exuberant and proud, the little ring gave him slight pause. When the king felt down for some reason, the little ring gave him an uplift and restored his smile.

The little gold ring was said to have inscribed on it three Hebrew letters, representing the Hebrew words for: This too shall pass.

The error of getting carried away with one state of mind is the failure in protection from inevitable shock when change occurs and something



gives way. Life is fast and has many unintended consequences. Integrating and building mindfulness from among life's many aspects, hues and configurations, makes our minds vastly more robust, agile and flexible. We are then better suited to respond to the downturns and more fully able to experience the upside.

I find this reflected in our the Torah portion of the week, in the very first word and the story it tells. 'And Jacob Lived in the Land of Egypt.'

Jacob had lived in Israel, which was his and his family's proper home. He prospered there and built his fortune. He felt rooted in that land and identified with his environment. Yet one day he found himself in Egypt. Now for Jacob, Egypt was poles end from Israel and foreign to his purpose, and he couldn't have felt anything but uprooted from his home and alienated from his environment.

Yet, we are told, he lived peacefully in Egypt. What that must mean is Jacob adapted to his new circumstances but held his own. Egypt was a foreign environment. So what he set about doing was transform Egypt into a less foreign environment. He did that by setting up a permanent mission there to maintain his House of Study and by carving out a little space of his own from which he delivered Jewish values to his expanding family and community.

Jacob Lived in the Land of Egypt is a paradigmatic achievement. I think this Israel / Egypt pair of contrasts can be held up as a metaphor for many other contrasting opposite points in the cycles of life and mind, including business and economic cycles.

I think we can draw from this a lesson in how to keep our cool and confidence as we walk through the valley of 2009. Through the example of such an art form as 'And Jacob Lived (peacefully) in the Land of Egypt' we can draw the inner equanimity to face down these challenging times, transform an unfriendly environment into a friendly one, maintain a level-headed and integrated perspective and continue with our social, creative and religious purposes.

As John Maynard Keynes once looked beyond his horizon:



“The day is not far off when the economic problem will take the back seat where it belongs, and the arena of the heart and the head will be occupied or reoccupied, by our real problems — the problems of life and of human relations, of creation and behavior and religion.”

So much for cycles, encore.

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