

The Circle Game
Erev Rosh Hashanah 2022/5783
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Yesterday a child came out to wander
Caught a dragonfly inside a jar
Fearful when the sky was full of thunder
And tearful at the falling of a star

Joni Mitchell sits in a paisley wingback armchair that could better be described as a throne. She wears a plum colored beret, tinted sunglasses, and a flowing purple dress, her brilliant white hair spills over her shoulders. Her face is full of a smile. She sings into a glittering golden mic and bounces and sways joyfully side to side as she improvises drums on the arms of her regal seat.

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

Everyone on stage is weeping, folk legends Brandi Carlile, Allison Russell, Marcus Mumford, Sista Strings, Wynonna Judd, and many more are literally moved to tears by the sight of this living treasure performing for the first time in 7 years.¹ In 2015, Joni² suffered a brain aneurysm that had the musical community wondering if she was physically capable of performing ever again. In July, she answered those questions with her surprise appearance at the Newport Folk Festival.

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2022/07/25/1113351769/joni-mitchell-brandi-carlile-newport-folk-festival-2022>

² As one New Yorker reporter notes, no one calls her “mitchell” because that’s only her last name from a brief and unhappy marriage.

Although this is not a Jewish song, per se, I know many of you know and love this song from your Shirim sessions at Jewish summer camps. It also contains a very Jewish sentiment, since as Jews we often find ourselves looking lovingly toward the past. In fact we have an Official Name for our Jewish brand of reminiscence. It's called "yeridat ha-dorot," the decline of the generations. Yeridat ha-Dorot is the theological concept that the generation who wandered in the desert was the most spiritually perfect group of Jews who ever existed, the generation closest to HaShem. Every Jew since them has been striving to achieve the spiritual heights they accomplished and has fallen short.

Don't worry, there are just as many texts that say the Desert Generation was the least spiritually accomplished, and every Jew since them has come one step closer to connecting with HaShem. We're Jews after all, so we can believe both at the same time. Whichever we believe at any given moment, it is true that we are often nostalgic for our past. As Walter Sobchak puts it, we have "5,000 years of beautiful tradition from Moses to Sandy Kaufax" to appreciate. Whether it is a Jewish athlete who made the big play or a particular melody or the smells of our parents' cooking, there is something powerful that connects us and compels us to carry on the Jewish traditions our ancestors began before us.

As contemporary Jews, our task is to bring those memories and moments with us on the "carousel of time" so that the religion and culture we hold dear will be passed on to the next generation. Tomorrow morning I will speak in more depth about the words, "chadeish yemeinu k'kedem, renew us as in days of old." This phrase, which we say every time we return the Torah to the ark, is another way in which we express our love of the past and our commitment to bringing our tradition forward. It's yet another Jewish oxymoron. Do we want to be renewed, or do we want the days of old?

Of course it is both. In the irony of ironies, many of the things we see as traditional and familiar were once brand new and perhaps even scary to us or our ancestors. It all started when Avraham Avinu left his homeland for a new Promised Land, and we've been exploring new adventures ever since. For example, this congregation first came to Framingham under the leadership of Abraham Shuman in 1885. In the intervening 137 years, the congregation has transitioned from Orthodox to Conservative, relocated from Coolidge Street to Pamela Road, and even hired its first female rabbi. We look back on the groundbreaking with nostalgia and warm comforting feelings of home, but when our parents and grandparents built this synagogue 59 years ago, it was a new, different, and perhaps even frightening moment. Similarly, a lot of the music and liturgy we know as traditional and familiar was once controversial. Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach turned the Jewish world upside down and made a lot of enemies in the '60s and '70s when he wrote fresh, peppy melodies for Kabbalat Shabbat. Now, those are the melodies most of us know and love and sing every week! And we continue in the tradition of revolution every time we introduce a new song or melody. Trying new things is part of our commitment as Jews, that's what we mean when we say "chadeish yameinu k'kedem," give us the strength to try new things as we have done before.

"Circle Game" offers us one powerful example of how to live according to this paradoxical prayer. We are nostalgic for the days when we saw the world with youthful optimism and seized each day with a burst of energy. Perhaps we yearn for the innocence of youth or the simplicity of years gone by. But we don't actually want to go back to the beginning before we had all the experiences that made us who we are, and we couldn't even if we wanted to. That's not how time works. It is our responsibility to pair the excitement and energy we had at the start with all the wisdom and insight we

have gained and charge forward into a bright future for us, our families, and our community. The words of “Circle Game” tell us we can bring our memories along with us, but that we cannot live in the past.

Joni Mitchell’s performance of this classic further shows us how to ride the carousel gracefully. She returns to the site of her debut, all the more powerful because of the years of wisdom and the beautiful career she has built. She is renewed, singing on the stage where she began in days of old. In the 55 years since her debut on this very same stage, Joni’s voice has dropped at least two octaves. Her performance is beautifully imperfect. Her voice cracks. She misses a word or two. These moments only add to the beauty of hearing this legend perform. At one point in the song Joni stumbles over the lyrics. She smiles and lifts her hands and laughs in her eternally girlish way. Then she continues, and the audience sings along with her. She has lived enough life to accept the mistakes she makes. Her joyful epiphany is that she is still that 23 year old waif full of excitement, and she is also a 78 year old queen of a musical genre, and she is every version of herself she has been in the 55 intervening years. She can’t go back in time to catch her first dragonfly, but she has brought that memory and meaning with her as she has grown into the matriarch of folk music.

The last verse of Circle Game, the boy’s “dreams have lost their grandeur coming true.” This is the only part of the song that I decidedly do not wish upon us. We are a warm, close-knit, and vibrant community with so many strengths. I know over the next few days we will see children here with their parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and even a few lucky great-grandparents. I will see friends joyfully greet each other and wish for a sweet new year. I love the enthusiasm so many in our congregation have for reading Torah and leading services and singing along. Tomorrow you will experience the

joy of several members who have previewed our new melodies in order to support Rabbi Strick and myself in sharing new music with you. I love the camaraderie of this community. All of us have experienced the kindness of the Caring Volunteers, who keep tabs on all of us and make sure we have the support we need. We cherish all these strengths and we dream of bringing even more kindness, community, and Jewish learning to even more friends and neighbors, some of whom we perhaps have not even met yet. Those are grand, shiny dreams, and I hope when they come true they will be a joy to us all.

Our liturgical cycle brings us closer and closer to our dreams each year. On Rosh Hashanah we seek renewal, and we accomplish that renewal by reflecting on our past. Next Sunday we'll engage in the ritual of Tashlich, in which we wash away the parts of the year we wish to leave behind. Then on Yom Kippur we will dress in fresh white clothing while reflecting and repenting over our past actions. Finally on Simchat Torah we will literally roll back our sacred text so that we can begin reading it again. Our rituals remind us that we can only move forward by looking back. Truly, we go around and around. Sing with me,

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

May we all continue to go joyfully “round and round and round” in the circle game.

Shanah tovah.