

**“Am Yisrael Chai”**  
**Erev Rosh Hashanah 5771**  
**Rabbi Dara Frimmer**

*Sing Am Yisrael...lead into Od Avinu Chai (showing community there is a second part to the song)*

Am Yisrael Chai as a song was popularized by Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, z'l. It was Shlomo who added the second phrase “Od Avinu Chai.” He took it from the Bible. Joseph asks his brothers, who he has not seen in 20 years, “Od Avinu Chai??” “Does our father still live?” It was meant as a question. He truly did not know.

In Shlomo’s song, it is a declaration. Am Yisrael Chai. Od Avinu Chai. It is certain. The people of Yisrael, also known as Jacob, the descendants of our father Jacob live.

And, this is the power of Shlomo’s song:

Because the children of Israel live...then, it is certain, our father, Jacob, lives, as well.

So this got me thinking about my father, Daniel, may his memory be a blessing.

**[SLIDE] – Picture of Dara and dad**

So this is my dad. ☺

And I thought, I know about that connection – between a father and his children...

And how we **live** in the presence of one another...and also in the absence.

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In the fall of 1997, my father was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer. He himself was a cancer specialist and so with a certainty no one could dispute, he told us he had 6 months to live. He had plans for retirement that included travel, photography and golf. I was graduating from college that spring. We were all in routines, making plans for the future, suddenly aware that we had been banking time that was no longer ours.

Now, sitting in the seat of the patient, my father saw the world from a different angle. He noticed the discomfort displayed by doctors sharing bad news. The language of war chosen by so many to describe living with cancer – a world in which there were victories and defeats – radiation bombarding the enemy cells -- the body, the soul, the being transformed into a battlefield.

My father retired from his practice, but often returned to the hospital to share his story. “My lecture this morning,” he would say, “is a version of On The Road by Jack Kerouac, a bit of Tuesdays with Morrie, and something I’d like to call ‘From Both Sides of the Stethoscope’ as seen by an oncologist with cancer.”

And he would teach...

- The metaphor of war does not capture the essence of what it means to **live** with illness. Illness is not a fight against another, but a long struggle. Some prevail by living. Some prevail by dying.
- The time of dying is also a time of **living**.
- There’s a difference between being cured and being healed. You can die healed.

In 1998, my father was thrilled to discover a healing service led by Debbie Friedman (who will be joining us in a few weeks for a healing service on Erev Sukkot!). He subscribed to a new set of medical journals that published studies on the healing effects of prayer. He spent hours on the web, googling words like “healing” and “miracles” and “life after death.” He attended conferences called “The Art of Dying.” His books line my bookshelves today:

**[SLIDE] – Picture of Dara’s bookshelf**

“Return to Wholeness,”  
“The Wounded Storyteller,”  
“The Measure of Our Days.”

**Am Yisrael Chai.** What does it mean to “Chai” – to live?

- It means we reach out to connect with others **even** when we are most afraid.
- We teach what we know to be true **even** when we are uncertain.
- We seek out wholeness and healing no matter how broken.
- We never stop learning.
- We never stop questioning.
- We affirm life **even** in the process of dying.

*Am Yisrael Chai.*  
*Od Avinu Chai.*

***Does our father still live? There is no doubt.***

There’s a story in the Talmud, Masechet Ta’anit 5b:  
A group of rabbis are sitting around for a meal, and one says “Jacob did not die.”  
Which we know is not true.  
He was eulogized. He buried. His family mourned.  
It’s all there, recorded in the book of Genesis.  
“Here is what I mean,” explained the rabbi. “As his offspring lives, so too, Jacob lives.”<sup>1</sup>

**What does it mean to “Chai” – to live?**

-- It means I reach out rather than retreat.

-- I see the world through a lens of deep brokenness AND profound wholeness.

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Yochanan stated, “Our father Jacob did not die.” Rabbi Nachman asked, “Was it in vain that they eulogized Jacob and embalmed his body and buried him?” Rabbi Yochanan responded, “I derive this from a verse, ‘Fear not, Jacob My servant...for I will save you from afar, and your offspring from the land of their captivity.’ (Jeremiah 30:10) The verse likens Jacob to his offspring: just as his offspring lives, so too, Jacob lives.” [Ta’anit 5b]

-- I wrestle with complicated questions that have no definitive answer and I do my best to love the struggle.  
(Though there are moments when I want it to be clear and decided.)

-- I cultivate a practice of gratitude as well as a practice of discontent: And so each morning, I wake up and I say Modah Ani L'fanecha, "I offer thanks to you God, Melech **Chai** V'kayam..." and, "I have a few suggestions..."

This is what my father taught me...this is what I teach to others.

*Am Yisrael Chai.*  
*Od Avinu Chai*

The people Israel lives...and through them, through me, our father lives on.