

Erev Rosh Hashana 5779

Rabbi Rachel Joseph

“We Can Be Resilient”

My mom was born in one room that my grandparents, two aunts, and uncle, all shared, in a small town in the former Yugoslavia. It was 1949 and only a year earlier the family was reunited after being liberated from Russian concentration camps. My mom comes from a long line of German, Catholic families that settled in Yugoslavia and made a life for themselves. Towards the end of World War II, the Russian army came through and rounded up the Germans: able-bodied adults, like my grandparents, were sent to work-camps in Russia; the old and young were sent to Russian concentration camps in Yugoslavia. My uncle, only 9 years old at the time, carried dead bodies to the mass grave as part of his duties in the camp. One morning, that included carrying the bodies of my great-grandparents. They sacrificed themselves for their grandchildren. Every day, they gave my aunts and uncle their food rations, hoping to save their grandchildren's lives.

When my family reunited, they had no choice but to move into a room above a local bar in town. They had lost everything: their home, extended family, prospects for the future. It would have been easy to slip into despair, to believe everything is awful and is always going to be that way. But my grandparents refused to accept that fate. They chose hope and joy. They chose life. With the birth of my mom, after the war, came the ultimate act of resilience. She was a path forward to a new story.

I grew up with these stories, but I still feel it impossible to imagine. When we think of our own life problems, with all the things we face, how do we write a new story? Where does our resilience come from?

We all have stories. And while the stories that bring us to our knees may differ, most of us have some story of personal catastrophe: feelings of failure when we were sure we'd succeed; frustration over losing sight of our goals; episodes of depression and anxiety; painful grief over the death of a loved one. The loneliness of being unpartnered; being partnered with one who does not see us; wishing things could be different.

And if we don't know those personally, we know them globally: When leaders fail us; when weather patterns drench and soak us; when fires destroy our memories. When the lives of some are prioritized over the lives of others; when anti-Semitism is embedded and emboldened deep in the roots of hatred; when it becomes normalized to beat another down in 140 characters or less.

So what do we do when confronted with this much awful? One choice is to fall apart and cry. That's not a terrible immediate response. And really, if we skip that part, it's probably going to come back and bite us. Another is to shut out the awful, pretend that none of it is happening...but that will probably net similar results. Then what?

Then, we need to be resilient.

Resiliency is the ability to bounce back from difficulty and hardship and even failure. The American Psychological Association defines it as “the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress.... Resilience is the virtue that enables people to move through hardship and become better. No one escapes pain, fear, and suffering. Yet from pain can come wisdom, from fear can come courage, from suffering can come strength – if we have the virtue of resilience.”¹ Since we can be sure that our lives will have challenges and disappointments, we need resiliency to respond.

We know what it looks like when we see it in other people, but when the awful stuff happens, we often don't believe that WE could be those people, that we could actually come through the awful of life better, stronger, more able than we were before. We believe, incorrectly as it turns out, that some people are born with resilience and the rest of us are out of luck. A huge body of research has shown that while some people may be born with it, resilience is not only an innate quality; it is not something people either have or do not have. It is a skill that can be learned, behaviors, thoughts, and actions that can be developed, a muscle that can be strengthened at any stage of life.

The question remains: How? When we are personally broken, when our society is communally broken, how do we come back to wholeness again? Where does our resilience come from? It all sounds nice but it doesn't include instructions.

What I see is that we cultivate resilience in two places: from deep within us, and from support outside of us.²

Our Torah is filled with resilient individuals. Adam and Eve, like my grandparents, somehow created a life for themselves after literally being tossed out of paradise. Moses overcame the failures of the Israelites again and again, even his own moment of anger destroying the Ten Commandments. Moses went back up on Mount Sinai and carved a new set of tablets. Resilience was one of the attributes Moses wished upon Joshua as he took leadership of the Jewish people (Deuteronomy 31:23).

And Isaac, the story we will read tomorrow morning. Isaac's story is a story of pain and loss, abandonment and anger, regret and eventual recovery.

Rabbinic Sages teach that after the trauma of the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac, and then his mother Sara's death, Isaac took a leave of long absence from his family. In the Torah text, we barely hear a word from him. Some commentaries envision that Isaac's departure was a multifactorial journey of resilience and recovery. After the Akedah, Genesis Rabbah (56:11) teaches that Isaac went to study in a Beit Midrash, a house of learning. There, he studied our traditions, learning to value joy, immersed, too, in a community of learners and seekers.

At another point on his journey of resilience and recovery, Genesis tells us that Isaac went out walking in the fields. Rabbis teach that this was not just an ordinary walk in the fields.

¹ <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience.aspx>

² Inspired by Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant, *Option B*

Rather, Isaac has gone to the fields to meditate and pray to enjoy nature and its restorative powers.

And there, in that expanse, he met Rebecca, and literally fell in love. We learn that Isaac was comforted by Rebecca, being bound up with her in a loving relationship.

The first steps in Isaac's journey of resilience followed a pathway of study, learning, and seeking: taking steps towards developing a spiritual practice, of being in communion with nature, finding moments of meditation and breath, discovering words of prayer – be they gratitude or anger – and seeking out connection with a presence greater than himself.

Elie Wiesel calls Isaac the most tragic of Biblical characters. “He is alone. On the verge of despair. And yet he does not give up. On the contrary, he strives to find a place among the living.”³

Isaac discovered along his journey that he could be alone with himself. He could be self-reliant and resilient. But it was in showing up to relationship with others – whether community, intimacy, or family – where he felt most seen.

But such strength isn't just a virtue of the biblical. All of us have to learn what to do in the face of adversity.

As a rabbi, I have watched so many of us within this congregation cultivate resilience deep within. I know these stories. I know we can be resilient.

We cultivate resilience when we remember that our challenges are not the sum total of who we are. The wheelchair we sit in, the pacemaker placed within us, does not define us. Our health or disability, our divorce or current unemployment is not the sum of who we are. When something life-changing happens, it takes over everything.

We do this with good things - when we are caught up with planning weddings and births, that is all we see. And when something bad happens, a death, an unexpected diagnosis, well it's not hard for our world to shrink to only that awful reality. When we are dealing with a huge stress, our lives move from expansive to more and more narrow, as all the other parts of our life fall away. The big issue becomes all there is. In our attempt to face it, we forgo all the other parts of us, the parts that actually give us the resilience to deal with our problem.

So when we are consumed with looking for a job, we forget to play ball with our children in the backyard. We forget to call a friend and go walk around the neighborhood. Cultivating resilience is remembering that we are more than one thing- more than just a spouse, or a parent, more than our job titles, more than our physical appearance or our ability. We are more than our hardships.

I noticed last spring when I would go visit with a congregant, that we didn't talk much about him being bed-bound. He would always begin with stories from his life, often talking about his work as a doctor. This is resilience - for I heard him saying, let me share with you the

³ Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God*, pg. 69

parts of me you don't see - who I really am - my dreams and disappointments. I am more than my present hardship. We become resilient when we believe deep within ourselves that what we contribute to the world matters.

And being resilient means more than being tough in the face of hardship. You must, they say, bounce back from your pain. "Bounce back" is a commonly used, but, perhaps, poorly chosen words. If you bounce back, you are the same as you were before the adversity. Eric Greitens, a Navy Seal wrote in his book on resilience: "Life's reality is that we cannot bounce back. We cannot bounce back because we cannot go back in time to the people we used to be. The parent who loses a child never bounces back. The nineteen-year-old marine who sails for war is gone forever, even if he returns. 'What's done cannot be undone,' and some of what life does to us is harsh...What happens to us becomes part of us. Resilient people do not bounce back from hard experiences; they find healthy ways to integrate them into their lives."⁴

Resilience comes from around us, as much as it comes from within us.

One of my favorite inspirers and teachers of recent years is social scientist Brene Brown. She teaches that when we don't have the internal strength to deal with life's struggles, thinking about someone who did or does can inspire us to do the same. Brown says "In these uncertain and risky moments of vulnerability, I search for inspiration from the brave innovators and disruptors whose courage feels contagious. I do this so that when I need them, when I'm living in my fear, they come to sit with me and cheer me on."⁵

So many of you inspire me. One of the people who comes to sit with me as I struggle, especially through finding a way to be your rabbi when the challenges in our world feel overwhelming and insurmountable, pushing me always to help you address the world's injustice, is one of my mentors, our own Jen Feldman. Jen has been resilient in ways that constantly amaze and inspire me. She has lived through untold surgeries and diagnoses that diminished her body but never her humor, intellect, or compassion. Now, battling ongoing issues that consume her daily life, she just keeps going, putting one foot in front of the other and sending ME notes of encouragement and ideas between doctor appointments and treatments and their terrible side effects. Her resilience reminds me that I can be resilient too.

We can be resilient.

All it takes sometimes is just one person, whose love and support you feel. Who are the people in our lives that will make us resilient, who believe in us? And who are the people for whom we will be their source of resilience?

And if the presence of one person, or a few friends, can help us move through our challenges, what of the presence of a community? This is the entire purpose of community - to sustain and support, to bear witness to and share. What inner strength one can find in participating in such a community, where people intentionally care about one another. How can our CBI community be exactly that for you, a place of giving, and receiving?

⁴ Eric Greitens, *Resilience: Hard Won Wisdom for Living a Better Life*, pg. 22-23

⁵ Brene Brown, *Braving the Wilderness*, pg. 3

The tools of personal resilience are the same tools to help us manage resilience in our troubled world. We cannot dwell 24/7 on the news and the ills of society - we must balance that with joy, found from being with friends or family, doing hobbies that bring us happiness. Our political divisiveness does not define us- we must focus on what we hold in common with each other. And we are resilient by turning our feelings of hopelessness or anger into positive contributions. Who are the people that I can help - what do I have to contribute that will make other people's lives easier? How do we draw strength and courage from community, but not hide in like-minded community?

We can be resilient.

Holocaust survivor, Victor Frankl, was allowed to set up a suicide prevention department in Theresienstadt concentration camp. Through his experiences in the camps, Frankl found that resilience comes from a person holding on to meaning and purpose in life. For some, that meaning and purpose was rooted in their ability to help their fellow sufferers.

Frankl writes: "We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms--to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way. And there were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom; which determined whether or not you would become the plaything of circumstance, renouncing freedom and dignity to become molded into the form of the typical inmate."⁶

Where does our resilience come from?

Resilience is the strength and might of the soul. It is a place where people show up for one another and say to one another "I see YOU," gathering together to be resilient, to build resilience, and to bear the weight of those still on their journeys.

After my mom was born, my grandparents knew they had to leave Yugoslavia for a better life. My grandfather contacted every embassy he could find hoping one country would give them safe passage. America responded. My family boarded a train, under the cover of night, and rode across the border in search of freedom and prosperity. Making their way to America and settling in Cincinnati, Ohio, my family not only survived, they thrived. They refused to let their past determine their future. They never bounced back, they never returned to who they were before the war. They suffered great trauma and that became a part of them. And, yet, they went on to send all four of their children to college. And eventually retired to a farm in Indiana where I, my sister, and cousins, spent so much of our childhood laughing, playing, and living.

So, I stand here today because of resilience. I stand here today because my grandparents found ways to navigate the brokenness. They exemplified the process of owning their stories, of

⁶ Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, pg. 65

falling down, of facing trauma, and writing daring new endings. And what a daring new ending to have their daughter fall in love with my father, choose to convert to Judaism, and stand on the bimah of Plum Street Temple in Cincinnati to give me a grandparents prayer at my bat mitzvah - their grandchild who would one day become a rabbi. That's why I tell this story.

We are resilient.

No matter the struggle, write a new story of your life. While each of us must struggle, it doesn't have to be the final word. As we assert our resilience, our fate is not sealed and a new destiny awaits. So, on this first day of 5779, I look ahead with hope, with strength, and with courage, at our lives that will unfold before us, at the joys, and the challenges that the New Year will inevitably hold. I know that I find the resilience to face the challenges in my life by virtue of the strength I draw from you and from this community. I pray that within these walls you will find your tools to continue cultivating your own resilience. Because we are a resilient people!

L'shana tova!