

YKAM 5778
KH Services

A joke: A man came to see the rabbi in deep despair. For fifteen years he had been pouring himself heart and soul into his business. He had struggled to get it off the ground, investing his family's money to try to make it fly. But it had never really taken off, and now it was actually crashing. Debts were piling up, he was consumed with worry, he couldn't eat and couldn't sleep, his family was in danger of falling apart. He didn't know what to do.

Finally, as a last resort, he decided to see if the rabbi had any advice for him. He told the rabbi all of his troubles and then asked, "Rabbi, can you help me?" The rabbi replied, "Try this. Get a beach chair and a Bible, pack them in your car, and drive down to the oceanfront. Bring the chair and the Bible down to the edge of the water. Sit in the chair, place the Bible in your lap, and open it up so that the wind can blow its pages. Then close your eyes, and start to think about your life. Consider all of your challenges and all of your blessings. Think it all through. When you are ready, open your eyes and look at the Bible. Read the first words your eyes fall on, and they will tell you what to do." The man thanked the rabbi for his time, shook his hand, and left. Three months later the man returned to see the rabbi. He drove up to the synagogue in the Rolls Royce he had just bought. He was dressed in a brand new custom-made suit.

He walked into the rabbi's office and handed him a six-figure check, saying that he wanted to donate it to the Temple to thank the rabbi for his wonderful advice. The rabbi was delighted, and asked the man what had happened after their last meeting. "Well, Rabbi," the man answered. "I did exactly what you said. I packed up my chair and Bible and went to the shore. I sat there for a good long time with my eyes closed, really thinking about my life and sorting out my issues. And then I opened my eyes, read the words of the Bible, and did what they said, and since then my life has never been better." "That's terrific!" exclaimed the rabbi. "But tell me.

What were the words you saw in the Bible that gave you such helpful guidance?” The man replied, “Chapter 11.”

I wish it was as easy to solve one’s problems as asking the rabbi for advice, opening up a Bible, or allowing chance to determine our fate. While I hope all of these can help, especially the rabbi, I know that when we face challenges, disappointments, and obstacles in our lives we may feel lost, helpless, or alone. I do not believe that these hardships are decrees from God. I don’t believe in a God that causes cancer, or a God that causes the earth to shake and an elementary school to collapse, or a God that knocks out air condition at a nursing home, or a God that causes one to lose a job. My God doesn’t work like that.

One of the major themes of Yom Kippur is the uncertainty that lies ahead for us this year. We reflect on our missteps from last year but also wonder what this year will bring. Our High Holy Day liturgy captures this uncertainty most directly when we recite the words of *Unetaneh tokef* --- “On Rosh Hashanah this is written, On the Fast of Yom Kippur this is sealed. Who will live and who will die.” On Yom Kippur we recognize that there are forces beyond our control that can wreak havoc on our lives. And while we want to think we have total control of lives, our life experiences teach us and our High Holy Day liturgy reinforces that we cannot prevent all the misfortunes that may happen to us and our loved ones.

However, what our tradition does teach us is that we *can* control how we respond to these challenges. We can decide whether we will let them destroy us, or whether we will emerge stronger. We know that circumstances can change in a matter of seconds and during these unexpected life moments; we need to develop our capacity for *resilience*. The field of positive psychology defines resilience as the art to move forward after trauma or challenges. While we often hear about building resilience in young children, in fact the American Psychological

Association says that resilience is not a static trait one that we have or do not have. Resilience comprises of behaviors, thoughts and actions that can be learned and developed in anyone and at anytime.

The haunting words of Unetaneh Tokef end with *u'tshuva, u'tefilah, u'tzedakah ma'avirin et roah hagezeirah*. “But through repentance, prayer, and righteous giving we can transcend the harshness of the decree.” The Hebrew prophets objected to the notion that mere acts of ritual and worship could fend off difficult times – and I agree. We know that we can't prevent all of our misfortunes but this morning I want to explore how Teshuva, Tefilah, and Tzedakah can help build the skills to be more resilient.

The word Teshuvah is usually translated as repentance. Yet, there is another translation that is more accurate --- Return. This morning I want to use this translation for Teshuvah. Teshuva is the idea of returning to our original state. T'shuvah gives us the ability to change course, to go back to our center. Our tradition is optimistic it teaches that we have the chance to change. Martin Seligman, the University of Pennsylvania psychologist, who pioneered much of the field of positive psychology, found that people can be trained to change the way they think – to return to the outlooks they had before they were faced with challenges. Seligman teaches that people who have an external perspective rather than internal one, for instance, “Bad events aren't my fault”, or an impermanent perspective rather than permanent one, for instance I can change the situation, rather than assuming it's fixed” makes those facing difficulties more psychologically successful and more resilient. The cognitive skills that underpin resilience can indeed be learned over time, it is the focus on returning to what we knew before that will help us through our challenges.

The second way that our tradition teaches us to build Resilience is through T'filah, prayer. I'm not suggesting that praying will magically make our challenges disappear, but I do believe that t'filah cultivates faculties for thoughtful reflection and sincere introspection. Prayer is an opportunity to open ourselves up to awe and gratitude. Facebook's CEO, Sheryl Sandberg and psychologist Adam Grant this past year wrote a book about resilience -- "Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy." Sandberg learned about resilience first hand -- when her husband, David Goldberg, died unexpectedly of a cardiac arrhythmia at age 47. Grant's research about resilience and his friendship helped Sandberg find a way out of the depths of her despair. After Goldberg's death for months, no matter what Sandberg did, it felt like the crushing grief would always be there. Through Grant's research he discovered that finding gratitude and appreciation is a key to resilience and could help move people beyond their grief. Sandberg and Grant write that people who take the time to list things that they are grateful for are happier and healthier. It turns out that counting your blessings can actually increase your blessings. After David's death, Grant encouraged Sandberg to write down three moments of joy before she went to bed each night. She writes, this simple practice has changed her life, because no matter what happened each day, she would fall asleep thinking of something cheerful.

Recognizing what makes us grateful help us to be resilient. The Jewish prayer structure is designed to do the same. Our daily Jewish prayers are based on this idea of gratitude. In the Nisim B'chol Yom -- our prayers for our daily miracles we give thanks to God for restoring our soul, for removing sleep from our eyes, and clothing the naked. These prayers help us focus on the small miracles in life enabling us to try to overcome some of our darkest moments.

And while T'shuvah and T'filah are personal skills that can help us develop resilience, the last in this prescription -- Tzedakah, righteous giving, is a communal act to help our loved

ones and friends become more resilient. Sandberg and Grant remark that, “When we hear that someone we care about has lost a job, started chemo, or is going through a divorce, our first impulse is, I should reach out. Then right after that impulse our doubts often flood our mind. What if I say the wrong thing? What if talking about it makes her feel self-conscious? What if I’m overstepping? Once raised, these doubts are followed by excuses like “he has so many friends and we’re not that close.” We put off calling or offering help until we feel guilty that we didn’t do it sooner... and then it feels too late.”

I’ll tell you that it is never too late for Tzedakah. Righteous Giving is a reminder to all of us that we are aides in someone’s steps to resilience. Of course resilience is personal – we can’t make someone resilient but we can be a guide, a resource for the process. Righteous Giving is sharing our love, our shoulder, a meal, a phone call, a postcard or letter. It is letting them know they are not alone – it is an opening for support. And even if those struggling are not ready for a hand or an open heart, let it be a sign to them that when they are ready we are there. Sandberg writes, that “The worst thing is not when people say something wrong,” “It’s when they say nothing at all.”

I do want to recognize that pain is part of loss and resilience does not diminish it. It does not erase all suffering – resilience is not about denying pain but instead about what we do with it. And resilience in the face of tragedy is not simple. There are fellow congregants this morning in great upheaval, who are facing an illness, who have lost their jobs, who are struggling in their relationships, and so many other challenges. For me to tell you to look for a silver lining is just wrong and unfair. All I can do, all we can do is to let you know that I am – that we are here for you. To give a hug. To sit in silence, to scream, to cry with you, to help see you through.

There is a beautiful midrash, a tale, about Joseph at the end of his life. On his way to visit his father, Jacob, he stops by the pit that his brother threw him into. This was the lowest part of Joseph's life both literally and metaphorically. Joseph's brothers were done with him, and this pit was the beginning of Joseph's struggles. He was then sent into slavery, was jailed in Egypt but from their Joseph became resilient. He Prayed, Returned his focus, and was the recipient of Righteous Giving. He arose from the pit and over time become Pharaoh's right hand man. And so when Joseph goes back to the pit he stands in front of it and recites a blessing saying, "*Baruch haMakom, she asah li nes ba'makom ha'zeh*—Blessed is the One who is in All Places, who made a miracle for me in this place."

Our Jewish tradition teaches that resilience is not overcoming, it's becoming. Becoming more, becoming our fullest, deepest selves as a result of adversity. We don't escape, but contemplate and reshape. We experience resilience when we are enlarged rather than diminished by our challenges, when facing adversity causes us to change, grow, and become greater.

My hope is that when we are in the pit, and struggling, that we are able to develop the skills of resilience to begin to climb out. It won't be easy but our tradition shares with us that we have the capacity for resilience. And when we finally do climb out of that pit – I pray that we can utter the words that Joseph did... "Blessed is the One who is in all Places who made miracle for me in this place."

May this be God's Will.