

## **Pleasantville Community Synagogue, Rosh Hashanah Eve, 5781 / 2020**

### **Sermon: How Jewish Tradition Can Make Us More Resilient**

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There is a song of the Days of Awe that concludes: “Let the old year and its curses end; let the new year and its blessings begin!” Certainly this year, those words resonate for many.

As I have called and spoken with many of our members over recent months, I learned that some suffered and recovered from COVID, while others sadly lost loved ones. Others have stayed physically well but dealt with anxiety or depression. Some members have lost jobs or economic security. Others are worried about their kids, their young adult children or elders they can’t even visit in person. There is a sense of collective grief over all that has been and may be lost, as well as anxiety over the fissures in our society.

We know that there is no quick solution to the current crisis. Indeed, there is no way out but through, and we don’t even know how long that will take or what the long lasting effects of the pandemic will be. However, we do know that there is one thing we can work on to help see us emerge better in the long run, and that is the inner quality known as resilience.

Psychologists define resilience as the process of “adapting well in the face of adversity and trauma.” It is not just about survival; it’s about growth. To paraphrase my own rabbi, Reb Zalman, this is about turning the current *emergency* into an *emergence* of something greater in ourselves. Or in the words of Sheri Mandel, whose son was killed in a terrorist attack in Israel: “Resilience is about becoming, not overcoming.”

Resilience can help us to grow from every experience, even the difficult ones. Over the past year, I have participated in a memoir writing group, composed of baby boomers like myself. Members of the group have shared stories about sexism, divorce, PTSD, and national traumas like the Vietnam War or 9-11. What emerges again and again is that we have all grown from our difficulties and without our difficulties we would not be the people we are today.

You might not be writing a memoir, but Rosh Hashanah is about writing in the Book of Life. It is a time to remember the past and envision the future. On Rosh Hashanah, we can write a story of resilience, or growth emerging from adversity. And Jewish tradition can help us do it.

When we think about it, Jewish history and Judaism are all about resilience on a national scale. As a people, we have been through many traumas: exile, persecution, and even genocide. But we have consistently emerged stronger, continuing to inspire the world as a “light to the nations.” It’s much more than the old joke that Jewish holidays are all about, “They tried to kill us; we won, so let’s eat.”

If you look back at Jewish history, every period of struggle was followed by a flowering of creative energy and new beginnings. The destruction of the second temple was followed by the flourishing of rabbinic Judaism. The expulsion from Spain led to the dissemination of Kabbalah. Even the greatest tragedy of all, the Holocaust, was answered not by despair, but by rebirth with the new State of Israel and by a renaissance of Jewish culture and community in the diaspora.

What is it in Jewish tradition that makes us resilient? And how can that help us now? According to psychologist Dr. John Grych, the recipe for resilience has three primary components: self-regulation, interpersonal relationships, and meaning making. In general, people are most resilient when they can manage their own emotions and actions, find a web of social support, and make meaning from their difficult experiences. It is striking that all three of these elements are present in abundance in Judaism.

First, the Jewish way of life gets us to practice self-regulation. Judaism is a religion based on personal practice. In the Orthodox community, even young children learn impulse control when it comes to observing mitzvot like Shabbat and kashrut. But even if you don’t abide by all of those traditions, Judaism has many other ways of helping us manage our emotions and impulses. Our rituals unite body, emotions, mind, and spirit, helping us to integrate our whole selves. Our holidays evoke different emotional states: from the Awe of these High Holy days to the hilarity of Purim, and Shabbat gives us time to pause and reflect, even in the midst of chaos. Another Jewish practice is Mussar; the cultivation of inner qualities such as patience, humility, or gratitude. Once observed primarily in the Orthodox world, Mussar is now popular among Reform and liberal Jews as well, with many programs available online or in person. Together, Jewish practices help us to manage our own emotions and build our own character.

Second there is social support. This may be Judaism's strongest contributor to resilience. Judaism is truly a religion of community. We can only pray all of our prayers with a minyan, a quorum of ten. We gather in community for every lifecycle event. Social support is particularly strong when someone suffers a loss, and friends and family surround them with love, food, and prayer. Our traditions of tzedakah and deeds of kindness lend support to the vulnerable among us. Even on these Days of Awe, we say our confessions not in the singular, but in the plural, taking responsibility for the acts of the community. In these days of COVID, we are largely unable to gather in person. BUT at the same time, I've seen how we continue to support one another. I've watched our members checking on others, shopping for others, cooking for others, sewing PPE for others, and much more.

Finally, there is meaning making. On the second day of Rosh Hashanah, we will study some of the teachings of Dr. Viktor Frankl, a psychologist who survived the Holocaust and created the school of Logotherapy, based on the idea that the human search for meaning is our prime motivator in life. Meaning making involves the ways that we frame and reframe our experience, often evoking our spirituality. And here again, Judaism is strong. Our sacred texts, our rituals, our holidays, even our arguments are centered around creating meaning, even or especially in difficult experiences.

Of course, the meaning making that emerges this pandemic will be different for each person. For some, it has been a time to clarify our values and realize the importance of family and community. Others have been energized to work for social justice. Each week as we gather for our Kabbalat Shabbat and Torah Study, I ask questions that get people to think and talk about how our ancient texts relate to the meaning that we need right now.

We are all going through a difficult time, though each is affected in different ways. It makes sense to lower our goals and be happy just to get through this time. But we can also keep in mind that we may actually come out stronger, that our society, while damaged, may also be able to build back better. Judaism can contribute to our resilience by helping us manage our emotions, find community, and make meaning. Over this holiday season and the year ahead, I invite you to avail yourself of what our community and our tradition have to offer in all these areas.

May we be blessed to emerge from this time stronger than before, knowing our values and working to support them.