

We Will Thrive: What Judaism Teaches us about Resilience

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You probably know this one: Every Jewish holiday can be described in 10 words or less: They tried to kill us; we survived; let's eat. Then there's the classic Jewish telegram: Start worrying; details to follow. My teacher Rabbi David Ellenson used to say that we Jews are a people who won't take Yes for an answer.

It is true, we are a people who take some pride in our suffering. But the fact that we can laugh about it is part of the key to our survival. According to Erin Lynn Raab, Ph.D., laughter is #2 of seven research-backed ways to grow more resilient.¹ She doesn't say what #1 is. Oh well.

Mark Twain had something to say about Jewish survival:

The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished. The Jews saw them all... and are [still here] all other forces pass, but they remain. What is [their secret]?²

What is the secret indeed? This morning I would like to propose that it is, at least in part, deep seated resilience. We often think of resilience as the ability to bounce back after trouble, which makes linguistic sense because the word comes from the Latin verb *resilire*, meaning "to spring back" or "recoil." Be that as it may, resilience ideally isn't just bouncing back, but rather progressing forward.

Psychologists define resilience as the process of "adapting well in the face of adversity and trauma." Adapting *well*. When struck with crisis or trauma or tragedy, we can't bounce back to who we were. The goal of resilience is more than survival; it is growth. I recognize that there are times when survival is all one can expect, but I think growth is worth striving for.

Across the span of Jewish history, The Jewish people has experienced trauma after trauma, and we have not just survived, but thrived. After destruction or expulsion, bouncing back was not

¹ Erin Lynn Raab, Ph.D, [Laughter Really is Great Medicine: We Grow More Resilient Through Positive Emotion](#)

² <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1898twain-jews.asp>. Adapted by me for gender neutrality.

an option; the previous paradigm was no longer available. Again and again, we have found ways to recover and re-vision, re-seed and regenerate vital Jewish life. We have cultivated resilience, both individually and collectively.³

Look to your left or to your right or on your screen and you will see someone who is resilient. Our presence here today, whether together in our sanctuary, or watching online testifies to our resilience, as a community and as individuals. It has been a really tough couple of years, and we are here because each of us is resilient.

You might be thinking “no I’m not,” because you’re comparing yourself to one of those people we hear about who are extraordinarily resilient: Holocaust survivors, cancer survivors, survivors of mass shootings, terrible accidents, wars, terror - and wondering “what do they have that enables them to keep going after unspeakable tragedy, and where can I get some?”

The thing is, resilience isn’t something we either have or don’t have; it is something that we develop, through practice, experience, and perspective, so we are prepared when the next bad thing comes along. We have all made it this far, but I would venture that most of us could use a little boost to our resilience. If we cultivate resilience now, it will build on itself because practice makes progress. It’s like saving for retirement, the earlier you start saving, the more you’ll have when you need it.

While we may be a glass-half-empty people, ours is a glass-half-full tradition,⁴ providing us with rich resources to cultivate resilience. Jewish resilience finds its source in the long arc of time. When we take the Torah scroll from the ark we sing *Adonai Melech, Adonai Malach, Adonai yimloch l’olam va’ed* - God has reigned, God now reigns, God will reign forever. In Adon Olam: we sing : *V’hu haya, v’hu hoveh, v’hu y’hiyeh b’tifara*. God was, God is, and God will be, in glory.

I see in these verses a Jewish strategy for resilience: Judaism teaches *us in equal measures* to remember the past, embrace the present, and build for the future. When we face adversity, our past is evidence that we can endure it, our mitzvot strengthen our days and years, and our future motivates us to persevere. We can carry on because generations before us have proven that we can; we persist now because future generations depend on us.

Emory University professor Robyn Fivush has done extensive study on the power of family stories for building resilience, including in the aftermath of 9/11 and the COVID pandemic. She

³ Adapted from Rabbi Deborah Waxman “[Into the Jewish Heart of Resilience](#)”

⁴ Joshua Hammerman, [Kol Nidre 2014 - Jewish Stories](#)

discovered that the most important predictor of children's resilience in the face of challenges is knowing the history of their family.⁵ We are *B'nei Yisrael*, the Children of Israel, and the Jewish people is our family. Knowing our family story builds our resilience.

It's a long story, of course, and goes more like "They tried to kill us; we survived - even better than before." When the Second Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 CE, it meant the end of Biblical Jewish practice, sacrificial offerings, and Priestly rituals. But it didn't mean the end of Judaism because the sages regrouped and created a whole new paradigm for Jewish life as we now know it, centered around synagogue and home.

During the Spanish Inquisition, Sephardi Jews were persecuted and expelled from Spain and Portugal. They responded by fashioning the mystical tradition of *Kabbalah*. Eastern European pogroms resulted in the emergence of Hasidism. The Enlightenment introduced Jewish emancipation, which brought many opportunities but also an identity crisis, sparking tremendous cultural creativity, itself a vibrant expression of resilience as growth: Spinoza's philosophy, Marx's political theory, Freud's psychiatry, Durkheim's sociology, Einstein's physics, Schoenberg's music, Mussar, early Zionism and Reform Judaism. And after the holocaust, the modern state of Israel was born - an independent Jewish state in our ancient homeland, after 2000 years of being ruled by others.

But just knowing history doesn't necessarily build resilience. Family stories are about memory. History we know in our heads, memories - even of generations long past - we feel in our hearts.

In the book *Everything is Illuminated*, Jonathan Safran Foer writes:

Jews have six senses: touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing... and memory." for Jews memory is no less primary than the prick of a pin...The Jew is pricked by a pin and remembers [sic] back to other pin pricks – when his mother tried to fix his sleeve while his arm was still in it, when his grandfather's fingers fell asleep from stroking his great-grandfather's damp forehead, when Abraham tested the knife point to be sure Isaac would feel no pain ... When a Jew encounters a pin, he asks: "What does it remember like?"⁶

Gabriel Garcia Marquez said, "What matters in life is not what happens to you but what you remember and how you remember it."⁷ The word remember - *Zachor* - appears almost 200

⁵ Robyn Fivush, [Have Kids Run Out of Resilience?](#). Watch her Conversation with Rabbi Rabbi Geoffrey Mitelman, [Finding a Communal Story](#)

⁶ Foer, Jonathan Safran. *Everything Is Illuminated*, Harper Perennial, 2003

⁷ Gabriel García Márquez: *Living to Tell the Tale*, Knopf Doubleday, 2004

times in the Hebrew bible.⁸ Joshua Foer, brother of Jonathan Safran Foer and co-founder of Sefaria, says that while other people remember by thinking, Jews remember by doing.⁹

The rituals we do on our Holy Days enable us to feel the memories, not just know them. When we eat our Matzah on Passover we say: *B'chol dor vador chayav adam lirot et atzmo k'ilu hu yatza mimitzrayim* - In every generation we are to feel as if we *ourselves* came out of Egypt. This embodied memory of liberation from slavery can fortify us when we are feeling oppressed in our own lives. Counting the Omer - the ritual recalling the days of wandering which led to the covenant at Mount Sinai, can encourage us when we are feeling lost or directionless. Purim makes us laugh (#2 in resilience strategies). Tisha B'Av - the commemoration of our worst tragedies is connected to Rosh Hashanah by reciting the 7 haftarot of consolation, reminding us that even after tragedy renewal awaits us.

While we *remember* the past, we *are not stuck* there. Judaism teaches us to be fully present in the present; We began our service this morning with the Hineni prayer; Hineini. I am here, present, focused and ready to pray with intention. Our Mitzvot are a vehicle for intentional living and intentional living builds resilience.¹⁰ Saying the Motzi before eating, reciting the bedtime shema, or lighting Shabbat candles all bring heightened awareness, even holiness, to the moment. The Talmudic Mitzvah of saying 100 blessings a day is a gratitude practice, and neuroscience research has shown that gratitude practices rewire our brains to be more resilient.¹¹ Maybe that's even #1 in Raab's research-based strategies.

Another proven resilience strategy is stopping to recharge and recover.¹² Jewish time is structured to end each week with Shabbat. The Torah tells us "*uvayom hashevi' Shavat vayinafash*" "on the seventh day God rested and was refreshed"¹³ and we are to do the same. Whether we observe Shabbat in traditional or innovative ways, accessing Shabbat's three main elements - *menucha*, rest, *kedusha*, holiness, and *oneg*, delight, can recharge our bodies and our souls, strengthening us for whatever may arise.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes:

In many other faiths, life down here on earth with its loves, losses, triumphs, and defeats, is not the highest value. For them, heaven is to be found in life after death, or the soul in communion with God, free of pain or trouble. But for Judaism, that is not quite life. It

⁸ Yosef Haim Yerushalmi Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory, University of Washington, 2011

⁹ Joshua Foer, Moonwalking With Einstein, Penguin, 2011

¹⁰ Laurie Schwab et. al., *Effects of Physical Activity and Mindfulness on Resilience and Depression During the First Wave of COVID-19 Pandemic*
¹¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/beyond-words/202003/resilience-and-the-practice-gratitude>
<https://search.informit.org/doi/abs/10.3316/aeipt.182952> and others

¹² Shawn Achor and Michelle Gielan, *Resilience Is About How You Recharge, Not How You Endure*, Harvard Business Review

¹³ Exodus 31:17

may be noble, spiritual, sublime, but it is not life in all its passion, responsibility, and risk."¹⁴

Our Biblical forebears surely must have felt the passion, responsibility and risk of God's call to them. And yet, Abraham, Joseph, and Moses each responded "*Hineini*. I am here. Ready to do what needs to be done, even though I know it will be difficult." Saying "*Hineini*" to life's challenges both requires - and cultivates resilience.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk said. "There is nothing more whole than a broken heart."¹⁵ Research has demonstrated what Menachem Mendel already knew - that resilience is built not by denying our brokenness, but by acknowledging it and growing from it.

The Talmud teaches that the Tablets of the covenant Moses smashed after the Golden Calf incident were placed in the Ark along with the new tablets. The two sets of tablets - broken and whole - side by side in the holy Ark teach us that brokenness and wholeness coexist, that after crisis or loss, we can move forward without denying that we once were broken, and a full life can ensue, though differently than before.

We build resilience by acknowledging our vulnerability and then moving step by step forward. Eleanor Roosevelt said: "You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, 'I have lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.'"¹⁶ When we feel broken, we can draw on past recoveries to remember that things can get better. When we are feeling whole, recalling our own vulnerability can motivate us to reach out to others who are broken.

Hillel taught: *Im ain ani li mi li...* "If I am not for myself, who will be for me; if I am only for myself, what am I?"¹⁷ Physical and emotional self care are obvious and well-proven strategies for building resilience.¹⁸ But resilience cannot thrive in isolation. Just as the broken and whole tablets were kept together in the Holy Ark, the whole and the broken dwell together in community. Offering compassion and understanding to others strengthens our own resilience as well. I am deeply grateful to those of you who have allowed me to be with you at the hospital, or to walk with you in your grief, because those experiences have gifted me resilience to face my own losses.

¹⁴ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, [Covenant and Conversation, Nitzavim](#)

¹⁵ Rabbi Aaron Goldscheider, [The Broken Tablets](#)

¹⁶ Eleanor Roosevelt, *You Learn By Living*, 1960

¹⁷ Pirkei Avot 1:14

¹⁸ American Psychological Association, [10 Tips to Build Resilience](#)

Something of this truth drove the work of one of those exceptionally resilient people I mentioned earlier. Psychotherapist Viktor Frankl survived Auschwitz by dedicating himself to giving other prisoners the will to live. He helped each of them find a task that was calling to them, something they had not done yet but that only they could do.¹⁹ He helped them survive the present by giving them a future. After the war Frankl built a school of psychotherapy based on the human search for meaning²⁰. He taught people to hear the future calling to them.

Jonathan Sacks draws upon Frankl in his book *Future Tense*.²¹ In the last chapter Sacks argues that Judaism is bolstered by its future-orientation:

*“We are not here by accident. We are here because God want[s] us to be, and because there is a task we are meant to fulfill. Discovering what that is, is not easy, ...But for each of us there is something God is calling on us to do, a future not yet made that awaits our making.”*²²

I understand this as a more helpful inversion of the platitude “everything happens for a reason.” I believe that even though much of what happens to us is random, resilience comes from finding meaning in it, and meaning gives us purpose.

The *Partizaner Lid*,²³ inspired by the Warsaw ghetto uprising, is a song of not just resistance, but resilience born of faith in a better future.

Zog nit keyn mol, az du geyst dem letstn veg
 Never say that you are on the final way,
 Though darkened skies may now conceal the blue of day;
 Because the hour that we longed for is so near.
 Beneath our feet the earth shall thunder: we are here!
 And if time is long before the sun appears,
 Let this song go like a signal through the years.

“Let this song go like a signal through the years.” One of the most deeply ingrained Jewish concepts is *L’dor vaDor* - from generation to generation. We tell family stories, carry on traditions, engage in *Tikkun Olam* because we care about the future. Envisioning and working towards a better future provides purpose and hope, both essential aspects of resilience.²⁴

¹⁹Jonathan Sacks, [A Call From the Future, Covenant and Conversation, Chaye Sarah 5776](#)

²⁰[About Frankl’s Logotherapy](#)

²¹Jonathan Sacks, *Future Tense*, Knopf/Doubleday 2012

²²Sacks, op. cit.

²³[About the Partizaner Lid](#)

²⁴Jamie D. Aten Ph.D., [The Impact of Human Purpose on Resiliency](#)

It's been a tough couple of years. We have lost loved ones, we've been ill ourselves. We've seen democracy imperiled, rights withdrawn, racism and antisemitism on the rise. We've seen communities felled by natural disaster or war.

And yet, *Hineinu* - we are here, the broken and the whole together, in this holy community.

Hineinu - We are here, reflecting on our pasts, making amends, praying for a better future.

Hineinu, we are here, building up our stores of resilience through memory, mitzvot, and faith, so that whatever befalls us in the coming year, we will not just bounce back and survive, but move forward and thrive.

Ken y'hi Ratzon, May it be God's will.