

“Resilience”

Rosh Hashanah Sermon

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Note: This sermon was delivered in five parts throughout the morning service.

Part One

Shanah tovah u'metukah. A happy and sweet New Year. Last year, during our High Holiday services I made the mistake of remarking to a few people that at least construction would be done and we would not be in the Unitarian Church this year. I should have been slightly more specific! While we are not in the Unitarian Church, I was picturing a slightly larger crowd.

This morning, I am giving my sermon in parts that will be scattered throughout the service. This allows you to either engage with my rabbinic wisdom more frequently, or get in more naps during our time together. Since you are all online, your choice will be less apparent to me than it normally is!

I want to begin this morning with resilience. This is not the first time in the history of the Temple that things have been a little rough. Many of you remember the great hornet invasion of 2018. You have sat through High Holidays that were unbearably hot. And, there was the memorable travelling rabbi who skipped town owing quite a bit of money. The community had to spend the next month paying for his rather expensive tastes. Those bad times have been punctuated by a lot of good. Life cycle celebrations, the Ice Storm Wine Tasting, welcoming Rabbi Susan as our first permanent rabbi, the opening of the Shuman Center for Jewish Learning, the first service we had in this building. The history of TBE, like our own Jewish history, is one of ups and downs. And, to be honest, not being able to be together, particularly in the newly renovated building, is disappointing to me, as I am sure it is to you. Even though your notes are in the ark and I can see your faces before me on the screen I miss being together in person.

Resilience is an important theme during this unusually difficult period in world history. The Coronavirus has killed more than 190,000 Americans, including members of this synagogue and the family of our members. Living in lockdown made many of us feel lonely, anxious, overwhelmed. Racial justice protests rocked our nation this summer, and as we enter fall natural disasters are causing devastation in Iowa, the Gulf Coast, California, and the Northwest. We, as Jews, are a people who have also known tragedy and hardship in our national story. We have been exiled, forcibly converted, and murdered for who we are. And, we have also known times of great joy--rededicating the Temple, which we celebrate on Chanukkah; being saved from destruction, as we celebrate on Purim; and establishing the state of Israel, which we celebrate on Yom Ha'atzmaut. Our Jewish story is one of rising and falling, ups and downs. It turns out that experiencing both tragedies and triumphs builds our resilience.

Bruce Feiler in his book, *The Secrets of Happy Families*, writes that the most important predictor of being able to face challenges is knowing a lot about the history of your family. Dr. Marshall Duke and Dr. Robyn Fivush of Emory University found that when children know their family story it gives them a stronger sense of control over their lives and higher self-esteem.

Knowing one's family history is the single biggest predictor of children's emotional health and happiness. It gives them a sense that they are a part of a larger family. These family stories generally take three forms. The first is an ascending narrative--we come from nothing and made it. The second, a descending narrative--we used to have it all and we lost it. The third, and most helpful, is an oscillating narrative--we have had our ups and downs, but we have managed through the hard times and better times are ahead.¹ That oscillating narrative is exactly what we have in our Jewish story. Our Jewish story connects us to our ancestors and gives us the tools to build our own resilience in the face of difficulties. We could all use a little bit of resilience now. So, as we go through our service, I will share four stories from our Jewish history to help us build our own resilience for the year to come.

Part Two

Text Study:

(15) Thereupon Moses turned and went down from the mountain bearing the two tablets of the Pact, tablets inscribed on both their surfaces: they were inscribed on the one side and on the other. (16) The tablets were God's work, and the writing was God's writing, incised upon the tablets. (17) When Joshua heard the sound of the people in its boisterousness, he said to Moses, "There is a cry of war in the camp." (18) But he answered, "It is not the sound of the tune of triumph, Or the sound of the tune of defeat; It is the sound of song that I hear!" (19) As soon as Moses came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, he became enraged; and he hurled the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain. Exodus 32:15-19

as Rav Yosef taught a *baraita*: The verses state: "At that time the Lord said to me: Hew for yourself two tablets of stone like the first...and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, **which you broke, and you shall put them** in the Ark" (Deuteronomy 10:1-2). **This teaches that both the second set of tablets and the broken pieces of the first set of tablets were placed in the Ark.** Bava Batra 14b

Our first story of a high and a low. Moses stands at the top of the mountain, holding tables inscribed by God with God's own words. He has been there for more than a month, solely focused on the task at hand--to understand the law that God was giving to the people. He walks down the mountain triumphant yet exhausted. He meets Joshua on the way down and hears, to his amazement, cries from below. It must be a war, Moses thinks. No, Joshua says, it is singing. Moses can see the people as his tired legs carry him towards his destination. They are dancing in front of an idol. Moses is enraged, smashing the holy tablets God gave him at the foot of the mountain. Defeat. The singing stops. The realization sets in. The people cry out their sorrow and pick up the shards from the ground, placing them in the ark meant for the whole tablets. A plague breaks out. Many die. Is the covenant broken? No. Moses heads up the mountain yet again. Sits for forty more long days and nights. Receives the Torah a second time and heads back down. This time, the people are ready and waiting. They receive the second tablets and lovingly put them in the ark. Broken and whole together. The day is Yom Kippur. The journey through the wilderness, with a tangible reminder of their own fallibility and their capacity for change. And, we, today know that story of resilience.

Part Three

We just sang *or chadah, al tyizon tayir*. Shine a new light on Zion. A prayer of hope written by a people in exile. One reason we are still here is a rabbi named Yochanan ben Zakkai. As Jerusalem was under siege and many Jews wanted to die rather than surrender to Rome, Yochanan, wanting to ensure the future of Judaism, undertook a daring plan. His disciples snuck him out of Jerusalem in a coffin, for only those who had died were allowed to leave the city. Yochanan ben Zakkai approached the Roman general, Vespasian, and asked that he spare one city and a group of sages. He wanted to go there to teach Judaism to the next generation. Vespasian agreed. Jerusalem burned. The Jewish community was exiled and enslaved. The people were devastated. But, just forty miles from Jerusalem, Yochanan set up a new center of Jewish learning and preserved Jewish knowledge. This learning would eventually be written down in the Talmud, which gives us Jewish law today. Through defeat, we found a way to persevere. Resilience.

Part Four

We are about to recite the Unetaneh Tokef prayer, a liturgical highlight of Rosh Hashanah. This prayer encapsulates the dread of the day of judgement. God is depicted as sitting on a grand throne, judging us and our fates. Will we live or die? Will we have a year of peace and prosperity or sorrow and hardship?

I imagine that this prayer was particularly poignant for Dona Gracia Mendes Nasi, perhaps the most interesting Jewish person you do not know about. Her life epitomizes the resilience our people have needed. Dona Gracia Nasi was born into a Portuguese family in 1510; her parents were exiled from Spain and then forcibly baptized as religious fervor struck Portugal. Her husband, a wealthy merchant, died when she was just 25, leaving her with an infant daughter and control over half his business. But, her business fortunes took a turn for the worse. The Inquisition came to Portugal and she was in danger of being arrested for being a crypto-Jew. Gracia fled with her young daughter to Belgium, where they were safer from the church, but not from men who wanted to take her fortune. She later moved to Venice and helped Conversos escape from Portugal, at great danger to herself. There she was able to live openly as a Jew for the first time. But, her fortunes changed again when the counter-reformation came to Italy and she fled once more, this time to Constantinople. She arranged an embargo to protest the Pope's treatment of Jews in Portugal and established a self-sufficient Jewish settlement in Israel as a refuge for Conversos. This was the first new settlement in Israel in the modern era. Through all the triumphs and difficulties in her life, each year brought uncertainty. When she heard the *unetaneh tokef* prayer she must have wondered, as we do, what will the next year have in store? Yet, through all her travels, through prosperity and fear, she persisted. She embodies resilience.

Sermon Five Original Opening Paragraph

As we draw to the conclusion of our service we moved from the traditional nusach, the traditional melodies the high holidays, to more contemporary tunes. Our ancestors would not know what to make of our worship--not only was Zoom not a part of their imaginations, but they could not imagine praying in the vernacular, people wearing tallitot or a woman rabbi. In fact, women rabbis are a modern invention. The first American woman to be ordained was Rabbi Sally Priesand in 1972. She is our last story of resilience. When Priesand was just 16 she requested an application to the rabbinic program at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. She

received a response saying, “We would have to inform you candidly that we do not know what opportunities are available for women in the active rabbinate, since we have, as yet, not ordained any women.” When Priesand entered the rabbinical school it was widely assumed she wanted to marry a rabbi rather than be one.² In the first decade after her ordination, when there were still few women in the rabbinate, she knew all women would be judged for what she did. It was hard for Rabbi Priesand to find a congregation that wanted to hire her. Many flew her in for interviews only to gawk at the woman rabbi, with no intention of giving her a job.³ Sally Priesand sacrificed a lot. She said she “often made decisions as to what was best for women in the rabbinate and not necessarily what was best for me.” She decided not to marry because she did not feel she could work enough if she had a spouse and children.⁴ Despite many difficulties in the early years, Rabbi Priesand eventually found a job at a congregation in New Jersey where she served for twenty-five years. Forty-eight years after her ordination she is lauded as a trailblazer and herald by the many women rabbis, including myself and Rabbi Susan, who came after her.

Sermon Part Five as Delivered

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Before she was a meme, Justice Ginsburg spent her career fighting for equal rights for women. Her mother, Celia, had graduated high school at 15. However, Celia not go to college, because the family sent her brother instead. Her great wish was for her daughter to continue her education so she could become a high school history teacher. Celia died the day before Ruth’s high school graduation. Ruth showed her capacity to recover from difficulties—she continued onto college and enrolled in Harvard law school—one of nine women in a class of 500. Throughout her schooling and early career she faced discrimination. The Dean of Harvard Law School reportedly asked all the female law students “Why are you at Harvard Law School, taking the place of a man?” She was hired as a law clerk only when a replacement clerk was guaranteed if she did not succeed—she stayed in that job two years.⁵

Ginsburg showed resilience through her career struggles and those difficulties propelled her to work for women’s rights. She took a gradual approach to ending gender discrimination, picking male plaintiffs and targeting laws that seemed beneficial to women but really reinforced the idea that women were dependent on men. It took years, and the path was not easy, but the cases, which were settled over years, made significant advances for women under the Equal Protection Clause of the Constitution.⁶ While many remember her from her years on the Supreme Court, we would do well to also remember the resilience that helped her become a lawyer and how her slow, methodical work laid the legal foundations for gender equality.

All of these stories show the resilience of the Jewish people. There is no doubt that 100 years from now and beyond, future generations will tell the story of the resilience of this generation. The Zoom life cycle events, celebrating everything from b’nai mitzvot to conversions to weddings. High Holiday services that morphed into online gatherings with some in person celebrations. Continuing Hebrew school and adult education. Calling to check in and finding a

way to visit in person. Coming together as a larger Jewish community in our cities and states to be with one another online.

We, along with so many others, have done that right in in Central Maine. We celebrated a bat mizvah and two conversions. We are having these services. We have continued Hebrew School, ran Funtensive and even added new families. We have taken care of congregants in need. We are a people who has had triumphs and tragedies, but we have shown, here at Temple Beth El, that we have the resilience needed to get through these times.

Rabbi Aaron Panken, former President of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion said in 2018 that the world was “‘particularly challenging and painful’ in a way that ‘transcends anything I have seen in my lifetime.’ ‘But here’s the thing,’ he continued. ‘The Jewish people, and our religious friends of other faiths, have seen this before, and we have lived through it, and thrived and built again and again and again.’”⁷ May we be like the ancient Israelites who gathered the broken tablets, like Yochanan ben Zakkai who kept Judaism alive during a time of trauma, like Dona Gracia Mendes Nasi who helped others even when it was difficult and like Ruth Bader Ginsberg who persevered despite obstacles. May we continue to build the resilience we need to live through this New Year of 5781 and beyond.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/fashion/the-family-stories-that-bind-us-this-life.html>

² <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/6638554>

³ <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/priesand-sally-jane>

⁴ <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/6638554>

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/15/fashion/ruth-bader-ginsburg-and-gloria-steinem-on-the-unending-fight-for-womens-rights.html>; https://www.oyez.org/justices/ruth_bader_ginsburg

⁶ <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/09/18/ruth-bader-ginsburg-legacy-418191>

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/06/nyregion/rabbi-aaron-panken-plane-crash.html>