

This Will Make a Great Story One Day: The Jewish Superpower of Resilience

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I know it is hard to believe, but I didn't spend a lot of time roughing it outdoors as a kid. You wouldn't find me camping and certainly not backpacking. In fact, my first backpacking trip was on the southern end of the Appalachian trail in Georgia. As a new backpacker I looked to those more experienced for advice about how to pack the essentials but keep my pack light. A trusted source told me that it was not going to be very cold, so I didn't really need to lug around a heavy sleeping bag (Chris disputes this part of the story, so feel free to ask him his version at the kiddush). So, I went on my first backpacking trip without that heavy but warm sleeping bag and needless to say, I froze the entire time. As my teeth were still chattering, my husband's response — and this he does agree with — was that one day it would make a really good story. And 20 years later that incident has a starring role in the Rosh Hashanah sermon.

Do you have people like that in your life? When you are hiking through the freezing rain, or you have a travel mishap, or your pipes burst, these chipper folks like to say, maybe a little bit too soon, that one day we'll look back at all this and laugh? If not, I'm happy to lend you Chris! But as exasperating as it may be sometimes, this ability to find the silver lining is part of a key trait that has helped Jews survive through hard times: resilience. As you know, this year I'm talking about four Jewish principles that can help us during difficult times. Last night, we discussed community, and this morning we'll explore resilience.

Resilience is our ability to adapt in the face of difficult circumstances—to feel the pain, to find the hope, to see the positive and to have perspective. It has helped our people to persevere through many tragedies from our days in slavery, to our exile and the destruction of both Temples. We have been resilient in the face of forced conversions and massacres. Rabbi Deborah Waxman, the head of Reconstructing Judaism, writes, “Judaism, writ large, is about resilience. Across the span of Jewish history, Jews have experienced extensive trauma, even catastrophe, and we have survived—as a people and as a civilization...And, throughout our history, Jews have ultimately transcended catastrophe after catastrophe. We have repeatedly breathed new life into the Jewish people and Jewish civilization and we have found pathways toward repair.”¹

The text study we did this morning exemplifies that resilience. When Rabbi Akiva saw the destruction of the Temple, he took comfort in the fact that in order for the people to return to Jerusalem, there first had to be devastation. Rabbi Akiva teaches us two keys to Jewish

¹ Rabbi Deborah Waxman, “Keeping the Faith: Resilience in Jewish Tradition,” *eJewish Philanthropy*, (August 15, 2017) <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/keeping-the-faith-resilience-in-the-jewish-tradition/>

resilience; honor the losses and find hope and even joy. Acknowledge the pain and learn how to move forward.²

We see this two-step approach to resilience all over Jewish tradition:

When Moses comes down the mountain, he sees the Israelites worshiping the Golden Calves and smashes the tablets to the ground. What happened to those broken shards? The Israelites bent to the ground and searched for each broken piece. They picked them all up, each and every one, and put them into the ark. On Yom Kippur, that very first day of Atonement, Moses came down with a second set of tablets. Those new, unbroken tablets were also placed in the ark. The Israelites carried them both--the broken and the whole, together. *Resilience*.

From tragedy we have found new ways to move forward. The destruction of the Second Temple gave rise to rabbinic Judaism; the Inquisition reinvigorated Jewish mysticism; out of the pogroms emerged Hasidism. And we are still here; a vibrant community birthed more than 3000 years ago in a land far from these shores. The Babylonians and the Phoenicians and any number of ancient peoples aren't here but we are. *Resilience*.

I've talked a lot in the past few years about our need to honor and lament losses and find ways to move on. Most recently, we ritualized loss and hope in our Covid liturgy. We have endured many losses and we have to acknowledge those events that are difficult or frightening. For example, the increasing antisemitism in the United States is troubling. The most recent FBI report on hate crimes for 2023 shows that anti-Jewish hate crimes comprised 15% of all hate crimes and 68% of religion-based hate crimes.³ We are lucky here in Central Maine to be spared much of what takes place in bigger cities, but even here in Augusta we've seen antisemitic graffiti at a local high school, swastikas spray painted in public parks, and a bomb threat last year that evacuated our Hebrew School.

Much of the hatred we have seen directed at the Jewish community has to do with Israel's actions in Gaza and the West Bank. I know that the war weighs heavily on all of us, no matter what our political beliefs. We mourn the displacement, the loss life, the fear and trauma that impacts too many people. And, we worry that political divisions abroad will fracture our Jewish community at home. There are many causes for lament, and I have not even mentioned fears about political division and the upcoming election, increasing loneliness and isolation, economic uncertainty, drug addiction, climate change, natural disasters—the list could go on and on.

² Makkot 24b tells this story. You can find the text here: <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/595460?lang=bi>.

³ "New FBI Data Reflects Record-High Number of Anti-Jewish Hate Crimes," *ADL* (September 23, 2024), <https://www.adl.org/resources/press-release/new-fbi-data-reflects-record-high-number-anti-jewish-hate-crimes>.

But one of our secrets of resilience is to look for hope in the midst of difficulties. In the Middle East, we see hope in the work of an organization called Interact founded 20 years ago by Aziz Abu Sarah and Scott Cooper. Interact focuses on peace building, creating multi-narrative tours all over the world, and working to bridge differences. There is a remarkable Ted Talk with Aziz, who is a Palestinian American, and Israeli peace activist Maoz Inon, the new co-chair of Interact. Aziz's brother was killed by Israeli soldiers when Aziz was just 10 and his brother, Tayseer, was 19. Eight years later, Aziz made a choice. "I do not want to take revenge. When I choose to be angry and hateful I'm being a slave to the person who killed my brother." Maoz's parents were killed on October 7th. He knew he had to choose a "path of not taking revenge. The path of reconciliation." In spite of the horrors they have both witnessed, they are still working for peace.⁴ It's not just them. This spring was the 19th commemoration of a joint Memorial Day observance for both Palestinians and Israelis killed in the conflict. The initial ceremony had just 100 participants, in 2023 there were 15,000 with more turned away.⁵ Vivian Silver founded an organization called Women Wage Peace, now 50,000 strong. Long believed to be a hostage, it was later discovered she was killed on October 7th. Her son has taken up her cause, working not for revenge, but for peace.⁶ These stories show us people finding a way to do their best in difficult times. People managing to find joy amidst tragedy. These stories can give us hope that we *can* repair the world. And although our news feeds and our newspapers don't prioritize the positive, for each of those issues that is troubling us, we can find similar stories of hope and resilience. We just have to look for them.

Looking for hope, finding the silver lining, laughing that "it could have been worse" – these are all part of what psychologists call positive reappraisal.⁷ Reappraising a situation to find the positive is a way for us to endure difficult situations and can help us adapt to stressful events. Instead of lamenting antisemitism, it's noticing how much more connected the Jewish community has been in the last year and how increasing numbers of people are choosing to be Jewish.⁸ Instead of worrying about the upcoming election, it's being thankful for the huge numbers of people registering to vote, writing post cards, donating to campaigns, and knocking on doors. Instead of being concerned about the future of the Jewish community, it's focusing on our vibrant religious school where every week six teens

⁴ I highly recommend you learn more about Interact and watch the full Ted Talk here:

<https://www.iinteract.org/>

⁵ Eetta Prince-Gibson, "We Had to Meet.' How Two Israeli-Palestinian Peace Groups Are Grieving Together," *The New York Times* (June 4, 2024),

<https://time.com/6985173/israeli-palestinian-peace-groups-grieving-essay/>.

⁶ Emma Goldberg, His Mother Was Killed by Hamas. Her Death Transformed His Life," *The New York Times Magazine* (September 30, 2024),

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/30/magazine/vivian-silver-oct-7.html>

⁷ Eric Garland, Susan Gaylord, and Jongbae Park, "The Role of Mindfulness in Positive Reappraisal," *Explore*, Volume 5, Issue 1 (January 2009) <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2719560/>.

⁸ Mimi Kravetz, Sarah Eisenman and David Manchester, "'The Surge,' 'The Core' and more: What you need to know about the explosion of interest in Jewish life," *eJewish Philanthropy* (May 9, 2024),

<https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-surge-of-interest-in-jewish-life/>.

give up their Sunday mornings to teach our children, and our sanctuary is filled with sounds of laughter and learning.

Positive reappraisal can help us develop a sense of perspective, which is another key part of resilience. Perspective helps us remember that what we are experiencing *now* won't last forever. According to research conducted by Dr. Marshall Duke and Dr. Robyn Fivush of Emory University, one way to help develop perspective and build resilience is through family stories. I am a bit obsessed with their study, which shows how the family stories we tell can play a large part in children's health, happiness, and yes, resilience. Not only is knowing family stories important in and of itself, but the type of family story told is vital. Some families have an ascending narrative: we came from nothing and look at where we are now! Some have a descending narrative: we used to have it all and now we are doing horribly. But some families have an oscillating narrative that highlights both good times and difficult times. Children in those families tend to have the most resilience. They know that low points will not last forever and they also appreciate the high points because they, too, are fleeting.⁹

This sense of perspective is a gift Judaism has given to us. Because our Jewish story is an oscillating narrative. Jewish history teaches us that we have endured difficult times and we have found ways to adapt and to thrive. This story of tragedies and triumphs is actually the most helpful story we could have.

Another story:

One day King Solomon decided to test Benaiah Ben Yehoyada, his most trusted minister. He sent him to find a ring that had magic powers. If a happy man looks at it, he becomes sad, and if a sad man looks at it, he becomes happy. The king gave Benaiah six months to find the ring.

Now, Solomon knew that no such ring existed in the world, but he wished to give his minister a little taste of humility. [In my opinion this wasn't the nicest move!] Now search as he might, Benaiah could not find such a ring. The day he was to bring the ring, he took an early morning walk through the streets of Jerusalem. He passed by a merchant who had begun to set out the day's wares on a carpet.

"Have you by any chance heard of a magic ring that makes the happy wearer forget his joy and the broken-hearted wearer forget his sorrows?" asked Benaiah. He watched the man take a plain gold ring from his carpet and engrave something on it. When Benaiah read the words on the ring, his face broke out in a wide smile.

⁹ Bruce Feiler, "The Stories that Bind Us," *The New York Times* (March 15, 2013), <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/fashion/the-family-stories-that-bind-us-this-life.html>. This is the first place I came across this research, but you can find it in many places.

Later that day, Solomon asked for the ring, Benaiah produced it, much to everyone's surprise.

As soon as Solomon read the inscription, he knew that the ring had been found. The jeweler had written three Hebrew words "Gam zeh ya'avur" "This too shall pass."

This year we might need the reminder; this too shall pass. The tough times we face will not last forever. The moments of joy we experience must be savored. There are so many positives in our world. And, no matter what the next year will bring, we have a Jewish superpower of resilience.