

Jewish Resilience

Erev Rosh Hashanah 2020 -- Rabbi Lily Solochek

In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a sacred occasion: you shall not work at your occupations. You shall observe it as a day when the shofar is sounded. You shall present a burnt offering of pleasing scent to God ... (Num 29:1-2)

Unsurprisingly, the Torah does not continue, “you shall each gather in your homes, each family before their computer, in the appointed Zoom room at the time told to you by synagogue email.”

In fact, if our ancestors from Biblical or Temple times walked in right now, the shofar might be the only part of Rosh Hashanah they recognize. And yet, we can trace ourselves back through time to Temple observance and see how our customs have evolved throughout Jewish history. We are undeniably celebrating this festival from the Torah, and yet it looks different now than it did two thousand years ago, and even different than it did last year.

This past year has been challenging for each of us, for our community, for our country, and for the entire world. Speaking for myself, it is my Judaism that has carried me through these trying times. The Jewish People and our broader community have found ourselves at these crossroads before and we have survived equally dark times. What is the secret to Jewish resilience and what does it teach us for this moment?

My theory is there are two primary causes.

First, our adaptability has carried us through turbulent times. The Talmud, a 6th century collection of rabbinic discourse, relates the story of the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE. The Romans besieged the city, ransacked and burned the Temple, and exiled the Jewish people. Removed from their Land, removed from their primary center of worship and religious practice, and dispersed amongst the nations, it would be logical for the Jewish people to simply disappear in history. So how are we still here, celebrating our ancient festival?

The Talmud relates the story of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, who, upon seeing the fall of Jerusalem has himself smuggled out of the city in a coffin. He then approaches the Roman general and makes a bargain with him to save Yavneh, the center of Jewish learning. After the fall of the Temple, the *yeshiva*, houses of Jewish learning become the central religious gathering place for our people.

Rabbi Yochanan's contemporaries asked, why didn't you ask the emperor to save the city? He replied, I didn't think he would honor that request, so I will save what I can.

We could read Rabbi Yochanan as giving up, we could condemn him for not saying "it has to be all or nothing." Or, we could assume that his choice potentially saved our people and our tradition. No, it was not the Temple. We had to shift our understanding of what it meant to be Jewish: no longer do we bring sacrifices, instead we offer prayers. No longer do we give burnt offerings, instead we share joyous meals with friends and family. Our ancestors took the essence of their tradition and adapted it to fit into the moment before them. We never abandoned the three tenets of Judaism: our God, our Torah, or our people.

Our ancestors in the Torah could not imagine the choices of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai and the shift from the Temple to the *yeshiva*, from sacrifice to learning.

Rabbi Yochanan could never have imagined Jews in Maine, gathering in our homes to watch our computers. We cannot imagine what our descendants will be doing 1000 years from now, perhaps celebrating Rosh Hashanah on Mars.

We are one link in the long chain of Jewish tradition. The choice that each of you made to show up here tonight, to step outside your comfort zone and be present for one another to celebrate together on zoom, to adapt and change, to bring Jewish tradition alive in this dark moment, that's the first secret of Jewish resilience.

My theory is that the second part of the secret is hidden in our name itself: Yisrael and Yehuda. Yehuda, Judah, is one of the twelve tribes, and is the root of the word "Jew" in modern English.

Our name, Israel, comes from Genesis. In the middle of the night, the Patriarch Jacob wrestles with an angel and as dawn breaks the angel says "let me go," but Jacob says "I'll only let you go if you bless me." The angel then blesses him with the name *Yisrael*, כִּי־שָׁרִיתָ עִם־אֱלֹהִים וְעִם־אָנָשִׁים וַתִּגְבֹּל: "for you have wrestled with God and humans, and have prevailed." (Genesis 32:39). "Yisra-El" -- one who strives with God.

The Jewish people have survived throughout history because we never stop asking questions: we question our parents, we question our leaders, we even question God. We don't give up, we wrestle angels throughout the night. We push ourselves to be better, we push our communities to be better, we push God to be better. And when necessary, we wrestle with God.

Yet our lives and our tradition is not built simply on that struggle, because we have another name: Yehuda, Judah, Jews. This name comes from our Mother Leah:

וְתֹאמַר הַפֵּעַם אֲנִי אֲדַבֵּר עַל-בְּנֵי קִרְיָאָה שְׂמוֹ יְהוּדָה

She conceived again and bore a son, and declared, “This time I will thank the Lord.” Therefore she named him Judah.

Leah names her son *odeh-Yah*, thankful to God. Yehuda, thankfulness to God. Our midrash, rabbinic legend, says Leah is the first to thank God, her son Yehuda praises God, his descendant David gives thanks to God in the Psalms, and during the Babylonian exile, Daniel gives thanks to God. Thankfulness becomes a generational practice present at our highest moments, such as David’s monarchy, and also at our lowest moments, such as Daniel’s exile in Babylon.

Gratitude is such an important practice, that our rabbis teach “one is forbidden to derive benefit from the world without reciting a blessing beforehand.” To do so is akin to stealing. (Berachot 35a). Before we eat, when we see a rainbow, appreciating a sweet-smelling tree, we say a blessing; even when receiving bad news, we say a blessing. According to Jewish tradition, a person should say 100 blessings a day (Menachot 43b).

We might ask, why the focus on gratitude and blessings?

The *Yismach Yisrael*, a 20th cen. Hassidic text, says that when we despair, we give over our power to our *yetzer harah*, the evil inclination, which causes us to sin. Despair forces us to see our shortcomings and lose hope. “We need to strengthen ourselves by acknowledging that we are precious to God and that each of us contains a piece of the divine.” (*Yismach Yisrael*, Pesach *Maggid*). By cultivating gratitude as part of our daily lives, we push back against despair and do not get stuck in destructive patterns. Gratefulness is an antidote to hopelessness, it anchors us against the turbulent environment in which we find ourselves.

We are Yisrael, God wrestlers, and we are Yehuda, Jews, a people full of gratitude. By balancing these aspects of ourselves, we create hope, and hope makes us resilient.

From the beginning of Elul, the month before Rosh Hashanah, until Simchat Torah, there is a custom to read Psalm 27 everyday, which ends, “Be strong, take courage, and place your hope in God.” In this time of self reflection we actively cultivate hope. Our tradition teaches us that even as we strive to make ourselves better and the world around us better, we must never lose hope. How could we even try to change if we didn’t dare to believe we could? Hope tells us that something else is possible.

Rebecca Solnit writes, “Hope just means another world might be possible, not promised, not guaranteed. Hope calls for action; action is impossible without hope.” (*Hope in the Dark*) Hope and resilience are not acceptance of the world as it is. Hope and resilience allow us to keep imagining the world as it could be. We adapt in order to survive the struggles of the world, while striving with God and humanity to build the better world our hope tells us is possible. Hope is not passive, it is a practice that we must constantly grow.

Our Talmud imagines the questions each of us is asked in the World to Come. “Rava said: when a person is brought to judgment they say to him, ‘Did you conduct business faithfully? Did you designate times for Torah study? Did you await salvation?’” (Shabbat 31a).

Our translation, “Did you await salvation” seems strangely passive. However, Rav Kook offers a different perspective. He points out that the Hebrew, “צִפִּית” is connected to the word “to scout”, thus changing the question from “await salvation” to “Did you scout for salvation?” (*Maamri Raiyah, Kodesh lechol,*

1930) Did you actively seek redemption? Did you do everything possible to bring liberation to the world? In the World to Come we are not measured by our wealth, nor our abilities or accolades. We are measured by how we responded when the world around us was in crisis. We are measured by the energy we spent trying to change the world, by actively pursuing hope and redemption, by holding onto our hope even in the darkest moments.

As we gather in this moment we are reminded: the Jewish People have been here before. We have been faced with destruction and loss, and we have overcome it. Our ancestors witnessed the destruction of the Temple and moved their religious center to the synagogues and study houses. Our community responded to the crisis in our own time by adapting to Jewish life online, cherishing the rare moments of in person activities and gratitude for the opportunity to gather safely that technology provides. May we continue to strengthen one another as we adapt and learn together, never letting the flame of hope go out for the day we reunite.

In this new year may we be *Yisrael*, God wrestlers, striving for a better world; may we be *Yehuda*, full of gratitude for our lives and all the gifts we have; and may these aspects strengthen our resilience to face whatever the year may bring.

Shana Tova!