

Cultivating Resilience in Troubled Times

Cantor Ralph was a part of this congregation for 72 years. While many of us mourned his death in 2011, no one, understandably, grieved more than his wife, Marilyn. For the four years after Ralph died, Marilyn mourned in solitude. She wrestled with her own issues of health, of depression and loss, and while she made attempts to come be with us in community, none were long-lasting. Then, one weekend, she went to visit her son and daughter-in law who had recently moved to Portland. She saw her grandchildren and great-grandchild and visited the Jewish senior living center. At the end of the weekend she told her kids- "I'm not going home." And she didn't. Her kids packed up her Pt. Hueneme townhome and that was it. In 48 hours, Marilyn had bounced forward- not bounced back to the life that was-- but bounced forward. She was able to see a new path in her life, with new possibilities.

So what makes a person resilient? I wonder about that as I watch tens of thousands of families begin to rebuild their lives in Texas, Florida, the islands, the resilience to rebuild a life, and a city. Closer to home, I wonder about resilience as I watch us respond to challenges: both the political issues that challenge us these days, and the challenges within our own homes and hearts. As we age, I see more of us wrestling with physical limitations, or encountering significant illnesses. I watch as we confront the death of those most precious to us- our spouses, our children, our siblings and our parents and our friends. And there are personal challenges that are not age-related. The stress of our jobs, and job security, the ever-increasing cost of living and health care. Marriages crumble. Financial security eludes us. We wrestle with depression, and terrible addictions, from alcohol to our pain meds, to anxiety and eating disorders. So many of us hold such significant burdens. It is a given of life that there will be loss, transition, times of pain, and death. In the Jewish world, we are challenged by a time of great transition for our institutions, as we struggle to successfully connect each generation to Judaism's educational and spiritual gifts. We are more embroiled than ever over issues of Zionism, pluralism, and what the future of American Judaism will look like. We add to that, fears for the direction of the world as a whole, as we watch secure and stable institutions weaken and shift, growing religious and political extremism on the left and the right across the globe, a

middle east that grows more chaotic, a world human refugee count that is unparalleled ever in history. We can't help feeling at times that things are moving out of our control, in our personal and civic lives, that the balance and health and goodness we seek for ourselves and others is more elusive. Resilience is our ability to face hardship and respond in a way that allows us to move forward. How can we be resilient as we face our personal challenges, the challenges to Judaism, and the world about us? And can we cultivate in ourselves a resilience that allows us to face all of these realities of life?

There are those who say resilience is a fixed personality trait, that our ability to respond to the world is hard-wired within us. Sheryl Sandberg of Facebook, inspired by the unexpected death of her 48-year old husband, writes in her book *Option B* that resilience can be cultivated if we have a mindset that we can grow, that our lives are not unalterably set. Becoming resilient means accepting that while we don't have complete control over what happens to us, we do have *some* control over our lives, especially how we choose to respond. But the foundation of resilience is believing in ourselves- that we matter as human beings and that we have real strengths to lean on, and we have something to share with others. I have watched so many of you within this congregation cultivate resilience. What I see is that we cultivate Resilience in two places: from deep within us, and from support outside of us.

How do we become resilient deep within?

We cultivate resilience when we remember that our challenges are not the sum total of who we are. The wheelchair we sit in, the pacemaker within, does not define us. Like the gifted violinist who insisted on playing her Stradivarius on her death bed to affirm that she was a musician and not a disease, our current condition of life does not define us. Our health or disability, our divorce or current unemployment are not the sum of who we are. When something life-changing happens in our lives, it takes over everything. We do this with good things- when we are caught up with planning weddings and baby births, that is all we see. And when something bad happens, a divorce, a death, an unwanted diagnosis, well it's not hard for our world to shrink to only that awful reality. Think of it like a funnel. When we are dealing with a huge stress, our lives move from expansive to more and more narrow, as all the other parts of our life fall away. The big issue becomes all there is. In our attempt to face it, we forgo all the other parts of us,

the parts that actually *give us the resilience* to deal with our problem. So when we are consumed with looking for a job, we forget to play ball with our children in the backyard. We forget to call a friend and go walk at the beach. Cultivating resilience is remembering that we are more than one thing- more than just a spouse, or a parent, more than our job titles, more than our physical appearance or our ability. We are more than our hardships. I noticed last spring when I would go visit with Arline, that we didn't talk much about her being bed-bound. She would always begin with stories from her and Mort's life, often talking about her work as a teacher. This is resilience- for I heard her saying, let me share with you the parts of me you don't see- who I really am- my dreams and disappointments. I am more than my present hardship.

We become resilient when we believe deep within ourselves that what we contribute to the world matters. Karen will tell you that "un-doing her retirement" was a vital part of finding resilience, after Larry, her husband of 42 years, died. A retired school teacher, Karen returned and began a new kind of work in small groups with learning challenged children, which meant that she had to be focused on the students, not herself, each day. And volunteer work is every bit as vital. Ruth fills her time and honors Jerry's memory by working 24/7 advocating for the social justice issues they had both been passionate about during his life. Those of you who may be laid up, but still knit hats or booties or blankets for a myriad of causes- this is resilience, in not letting your condition deceive you into thinking you don't have something important to contribute. Sheryl Sandberg writes that for her, counting her contributions was more important than counting her blessings. She was grateful for her blessings, but counting her contributions each day, however small, reminded her that she could prevail over her grief. For all of us, counting our contributions builds our confidence in ourselves, so necessary in our lowest moments, by reminding us that we can make a difference, what we contribute matters. (p. 68)

Resilience comes from around us, as much as it comes from within us. We are surrounded by people and community. All it takes sometimes is just one person, whose love and support you feel. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor writes of the positive influence of her *abuelita*, as she grew up in Spanish Harlem, surrounded by poverty, alcoholism, and racism. With a loving grandmother, she found the resilience to believe in herself, and become an avid learner. Karen will

tell you how important it was to her that her sister in law called her every night, just before bedtime. And her brother would call at dinnertime for weeks after Larry died. Having their presence at those two incredibly difficult times of the day made a world of difference. The Kalisker rebbe, Abraham Kalisker, taught *Dibbuk Chaverim*, that we should cleave to our friends. Imagine the kind of friendship that implies that kind of mutual covenant of care, in our moments of weakness. Who are the people in our lives that will make us resilient, who believe in us? And who are the people for whom we will be *their* source of resilience?

And if the presence of one person, or a few friends, can help us move through our challenges, what of the presence of a community? Michael, who raised here at TBT, lost his dad to prostate cancer when Michael was 8 years old. The summer he was ten his mom wisely sent him to Camp Kesem, a camp that supports kids through and beyond their parent's cancer. Michael is one of four TBT boys who have been either a camper or counselor at Kesem. Now 20 years old, Michael wrote this: "After I lost my father, it became hard for me to believe I was loved, because I felt like the world hated me. 'If I'm supposed to be happy, why would the world take my dad from me...?', I wondered through the ages of 8,9,10. The feeling of being cared for and loved by my counselors and community at Kesem helped put those questions to rest... through the years. The world did love me. It gave me all of these wonderful people who are here for me. To play with me. To laugh with me. To cry with me. To be here with me. The world must love me, I concluded, because it gave me Camp Kesem," Michael wrote.

This is the entire purpose of community- to sustain and support, to bear witness to and share. What inner strength one can find in participating in such a community, where people intentionally care about one another. How can our TBT community be exactly that for you, a place of giving, and receiving?

As much as we need to cultivate resilience in our personal lives, not all of what troubles us comes from our personal circumstance. Our daily prayerbook reads: "Remove from us suffering and grief", referring both to our personal troubles, *and specifically to the ills of society*. I remember well in the aftermath of 9/11, the many congregants who came to talk with me, responding to the enormous upheaval and uncertainty that had entered our political life, when the condition of the world felt like it was changing so quickly and the sense of trust we had in the world seemed to evaporate. Our current global and national

violence, discontent, and belligerence troubles all of us. Why can't we all just get along, we ask, over and over. We feel this dis-ease as a disease within ourselves, and within the body politic. From where do we find the resilience to face the future cheerfully, when faced with the uncertainty of national and world events?

The tools of personal resilience are the same tools to help us manage resilience in our troubled world. We cannot dwell 24/7 on the news and the ills of society- we must balance that with joy, found from being with friends or family, doing hobbies that bring us happiness. Our political divisiveness does not define us- we must focus on what we hold in common with each other. And we are resilient by turning our feelings of hopelessness or anger into positive contributions. Who are the people that I can help- what do I have to contribute that will make other people's lives easier? The lawyer in our congregation who volunteers to help Dreamers fill out DACA renewal papers, waiving the steep fee, and bringing along his daughter who is learning Spanish in Middle school to help communicate. When there are so many concerns that overwhelm us, we remind ourselves, that we are not helpless to the whims of the world, that we have a voice. What can I do to find myself in the company of others, to advocate for causes I care about? How do we draw strength and courage from community, but not hide in like-minded community? I am inspired by the coming together of community in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, watching people of all faiths, races, political persuasions, backgrounds and ages reach out and help each other in the kindest of ways. If that isn't resilience of the soul, I don't know what is- in troubling times, we have so much more inside ourselves than we might otherwise believe is there.

So on this first day of Rosh Hashanah, I look ahead with hope, with strength and courage, at our lives that will unfold before us, at the joys and the challenges that the new year will inevitably hold. I know that I find the resilience to face the challenges in my life by virtue of the strength I draw from you and from this community. I pray that within these walls you will find your tools to continue cultivating your own resilience. L'shana tova.