

**FINDING RESILIENCE
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Each summer holds the same routine for many in our city—warmer weather, time out at weekend homes, kids at camp, parents with more ‘me’ time, freedom from homework, trips to Citi Field or Yankees Stadium, dress-down work days or weeks, perhaps, even shorter work schedules as the weekend getaways expanded to include Fridays or Mondays. This summer, for a span of two weeks, Americans and many around the world were glued to their televisions or tablets—watching as Athletes around the world participated in the Games of the 21st Olympiad. Indeed there were favorites: Michael Phelps who didn’t disappoint, Women’s soccer that did. Simone Manuel became the first African American woman to win a Gold medal in swimming. Simone Biles who stole the hearts of millions. And for the people of Puerto Rico, Monica Puig—a clear underdog—went on to defeat Tennis’ second seed, Angelique Kerber—to capture Puerto Rico’s first gold medal. Mara Abbott—who moved into first position in the women’s 87-mile bike race, after Annamiek Van Vluten crashed with serious injury. Abbott, considered one of the strongest uphill cyclists

watched as her 38 second lead precipitously declined in the last kilometer of the race—within 100 meters of the finish line she steeply descended from Gold Medal to 4th place—no medal--A heart-breaking moment to be sure. Aly Reisman—fondly called ‘the grandma’ of her gymnastics team brought confidence and encouragement to her younger teammates. The image of Aly hugging Simone Biles as Biles took the gold was an image of *mentschlikite* and sportsmanship personified.

As we know Olympic athletes train for years—sacrifice much of their young lives—as do parents, and even grandparents, make sacrifices: The competition meets, the travel schedules, the financial burden, the pressure, and ultimately, the feeling of exaltation or bitter defeat. More than half of the athletes that participated in Rio did not medal—and, many returned to their native countries without fanfare or ticker tape parades—these hopeful stars will now take a deep breath and begin the grueling process once again. Somehow, somewhere, they will find the resilience to tuck their defeats into a corner and forge ahead, eyes, body and mind set on doing better in Tokyo in 2020—visioning themselves on the platform clutching the elusive gold medal in their hands.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines resilience as “an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change.” What motivates defeated athletes to kick-start the cycle of Olympic training? For some training has already begun for 2020. Only a rarified few athletes will receive Nike or sports drink endorsement—fewer will become sports commentators. The vast majority of those who train will barely succeed financially between this year’s Olympics and 2020—indeed, they must have the inner gumption – the stamina, the passion and resilience to start from scratch—never relinquishing their quest for personal best or world record.

These High Holy Days—this first eve of the New Year 5777—is finding that place within each of us to start anew. It’s about tapping into our spiritual, resilience gene. The meaning of these *Noraim*—Days of Awe—is firmly rooted in our desire to turn from those actions when we missed the mark—make adjustments and continue on life’s journey. Elie Wiesel, the vocal and written conscience of the Holocaust, who died earlier this year, wrote, “Because I remember, I despair. Because I remember, I have the duty to reject despair.”

Tomorrow morning’s Torah reading, of the *Akedah*—the Binding of Isaac is perhaps the most controversial portion of Torah. Abraham returns

from that life-altering ordeal to find his beloved Sarah has died—one tradition teaches that upon hearing of Abraham's God-given mission, Sarah died from shock, sadness, rage and pain. Sarah—alone with her thoughts, overwhelmed by her emotions could not find resilience. In contrast, Abraham, while still mourning his beloved Sarah—looks to his future that almost went up as smoke on the altar, and sends forth his most trusted servant—perhaps his singular confidant, to find a wife for Isaac and to fulfill God's promise of making Abraham a mighty nation.

Resilience is most critical when we are faced with defeat, when we desperately try to find purpose and meaning in the wake of catastrophe.

Sherri Mandell's book, *Road to Resilience*, published this past November, provides us with direction. Mandell was the mother of 13 year-old Koby, who in May of 2001 with his friend, Yosef Ishran, were stoned to death—the 62nd and 63rd fatalities of the Second Intifada in Israel. One can ask how a parent can ever overcome such unimaginable tragedy. In her prologue to the book, Mandell wrote:

Jewish philosophy teaches that resilience is not overcoming, it's becoming. Becoming more, becoming our fullest, deepest selves as a result of adversity. We don't escape, but contemplate and reshape. We don't leap

over troubles as if they don't exist. We allow them to be our teachers. We experience resilience when we are enlarged rather than diminished by our challenges, when facing adversity causes us to change, grow, and become greater.

Building upon Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' literary style found in *The Five Stages of Death*, Mandell explores the seven Cs of resilience: chaos, community, choice, creativity, commemoration, consecration, and celebration. Mandell, while holding her precious Koby in her heart and mind has learned to live Elie Wiesel's teaching to reject despair.

Walking that oft-times treacherous path is not easy. There are individuals who rise to the spiritual challenge and others, no matter their intentions, like our matriarch Sarah, find the path too deep and daunting to climb.

1986, thirty years ago, was a most interesting year for Major League Baseball—particularly for the Boston Red Sox, California Angels and New York Mets. I am certain many Mets fans here remember the roller coaster ride that eventually led to the Mets, game 7, World Series victory. I want to highlight a few sports moments that took place in that post-season year—mere moments that were literally life altering. The first memory is that of

the 5th Game of the pennant race between the California Angels and the Boston Red Sox. With only one out needed in the top of the 9th to win the series, Angels' 'closer' pitcher, Donnie Moore threw a home run pitch to Boston Red Sox center fielder, Dave Henderson. Although the Angels tied the game in the bottom of the 9th, in the top of the 11 Henderson hit a sacrifice fly off of Moore—a double whammy—to win the game. The teams returned to Fenway and the rest is history...The Red Sox faced the New York Mets in the 1986 World Series. In game 6 of that World Series, in the 10th inning, Red Sox first baseman Bill Buckner allowed a ground ball tapped by Mookie Wilson to roll between his legs allowing the winning run to score. The rest is history—the Mets took game 7 for the World Series championship.

Both Buckner and Moore became the butt of much criticism and unkindly jokes in the days and months following the World Series. Each one wore the scar of scorn—though they didn't wear it equally well. Both Moore and Buckner, played through serious injuries the entire '86 season. Buckner at age 40 hung up his ball player uniform, and with the support of family and friends, became both a successful businessman and well-respected major league coach—only retiring from the sport he loved two

years ago. Donnie Moore, who suffered from rib cage nerve damage wasn't as resilient. Moore went into a tailspin of despair and pain causing him to leave baseball in August of '89. Less than one year later, after taking his wife's life, Donnie Moore committed suicide.

Too many people today, alone, can't make the cataclysmic climb out of moments of disconnect or despair. Resilience is dependent upon both inner strength and communal support. Sherri Mandell could not have emerged from her tragic loss without the constant nurturing and love of friends and strangers who helped nourish her soul back to life. Mandell and to a different extent, Buckner, found a place of belonging after defeat—they realized that their lives mattered even though their lives would never be the same.

Sebastian Junger—in his recent book *Tribe—On Homecoming and Belonging*, examines Native American society and the profound sense of loyalty demonstrated by those born into that culture, as well as for those white men and women who in the 19th century, by choice or by force, became part of that Native American world. Junger posits, that when people have a sense of belonging—when they find meaning in

community—there is a tremendous sense of loyalty even when confronted with trauma or risk.

“Junger wrote, “We can learn from tribal societies about loyalty and belonging and the eternal human quest for meaning. It’s about why—for many people—war feels better than peace and hardship can turn out to be a great blessing and disasters are sometimes remembered more fondly than weddings or tropical vacations. Humans don’t mind hardship, in fact they thrive on it, what they mind is not feeling necessary.”

Junger sites a 2012 study in the *Journal for Affective Disorders*, which reported, “The economic and marketing forces of modern society have engineered an environment...that maximizes consumption at the long-term cost of well-being.” It’s fascinating that during times of war suicide rates drop—when people feel they have a contribution to make to the war effort—their lives gain new meaning. In contrast, white-males in the U.S., experience the highest rate of suicide. As September 11th will forever cast its shadow on High Holy Day observances—if we think back to that fateful day and the weeks that followed—people uniquely connected to one another—whether in looking at the make-shift billboards of missing persons, men and women spending 230 days on The Pile at Ground Zero,

first to rescue victims and then to recover precious remains, children and adults alike joining together to make meals and cards for police and fire departments decimated by the loss of colleagues who ran into the fated twin towers to save lives. We saw parents hug children a little tighter. The best of New York emerged out of the ashes in the weeks following September 11th.

This past year, when meeting with *bnai mitzvah* students who turned 13 in 2015-2016, I often asked parents the following question—‘Given the fact that you lived through one of the darkest days in American history, a time when New York City was licking its emotional wounds, what gave you the strength, desire to conceive and bring new life into a shattered world?’

And just 3 weeks ago, when Chelsea, was rocked by a terrorizing explosion resulting in 29 injuries, people rallied to help. In a year where racial tensions are boiling over—where police and black communities are consumed with anger and suspicion, it was heartening to see the young black Starbucks worker, Germaine, reach over the police barrier on 23 St and hand police officers donuts and coffee. Catastrophic moments can help dissolve racial tension and unite Americans across color lines.

And when we speak about community—when we speak of where that sense of balance can be found—the go-to place for solace and hope—no JCC, or gym or artistic setting provides that emotional security more than houses of worship. When 9/11 pummeled our city and assaulted our sensibilities—synagogues, churches and mosques literally became sanctuaries for the shell-shocked. Our own congregation was overflowing at services on September 14, with those who needed the comfort of community—who sought a spiritual equilibrium in the pitch-black shadow of chaos. Synagogues in New York galvanized corps of volunteers to call every temple member—just to check in. For some congregations, this custom still persists. More than any Jewish institution, the synagogue is the place Jews, and those who have created Jewish homes, turn to for solace, strength and community—let me repeat, no organization or institution can provide parallel meaning or comfort.

It is because of that profound sense of connection and community that temples provide, that resilience becomes a steep upward climb, when fracture happens within that very sacred place of trust and nurturing.

We join together tonight, some of you new to our congregation—while others have been part of this *kehilah kedoshah*—this sacred

community for decades. Tonight has many firsts that can be perceived either as movement forward or as a departure from the past. Before leadership engaged me as your interim rabbi, they made the wise decision to ensure that there the music on these High Holy Days would echo with familiarity. I met with Gerard Edery, last spring to prepare for the High Holy Days. But as the Jewish saying goes: “*Mann traoch, Gott Lauch*—people plan and God laughs.” As you know, Gerard underwent emergency back surgery in Poland at the end of August...I know his heart is with us tonight as our prayers for a speedy recovery are with him. Yet, we did not despair—a resilience gene kicked into high gear—we tapped all resources and were so fortunate to engage two wonderful spiritual leaders and two superb accompanists, for these High Holy Days—Cantor Ginsberg will be our vocal conduit to God on this *Rosh HaShanah* with Paul Olson as her accompanist, and Ellen Allard will inspire and lead us on *Yom Kippur* with Carole Rivel at the piano.

For some, the complete change in clergy leadership on this *bimah* would have been *Dayeinu*—would have been sufficient for some in our congregation to dive-deep into their resilience bank. Some of the melodies have changed while the clergy team and accompanists have sought to

preserve musical elements of the service held precious by many. The spiritual elephant in the room, though, is not the changes to these High Holy Day services, rather, it is the pain, anger, and sadness and guilt felt by so many—it is the culmination of the hurt and anger expressed during the many months leading up to and following the congregational vote last February. There is a popular story told On Yom Kippur that has meaning for us tonight. The story of the man who went through town week after week saying hurtful, and at times, untrue things about his neighbors. As he approached the *Noraim*—the High Holy Days—he went to his rabbi and asked how he could make amends. The rabbi told him to take a pillowcase and stuff it full of feathers. The man thought the request odd, but nevertheless, complied with the rabbi’s instruction. When he returned, proud that he stuffed hundreds of little feathers into the pillowcase, the rabbi told him to go out on the windiest of days and empty the pillow. The next day a strong west wind blew—and the man went out—cut open the sides of the pillow—and flung it into the air—the feathers swirled and were blown by the wind to points not visible to the eye. The man returned to the rabbi—who then instructed the man to go out and collect the feathers—an impossible task.

This ancient story underscores the fact that words, and in the 21st century—emails, cannot easily be deleted. More importantly, the feelings evoked by those words cannot easily be assuaged. There is no spiritual or emotional Clorox to sanitize the past—There is no Obliviate Charm—used in Harry Potter—to erase the memories of those who were pained. Jewish tradition provides us with a once-in-a-year opportunity to do *Teshuvah*—to turn—not obliterating the past—but turning to make the future a better one. On Yom Kippur we will often pray the word *Chatanu*—usually translated as, we have sinned. But the word *Chet* literally is not a sin; rather, it is the ‘mark’ found in archery. When we commit a *chet*—we have missed the mark—we have fallen short of our highest-selves. Indeed, there are many in this sacred space that can turn and point the finger—remembering words spoken, spirits fractured, and hurt and anger remaining. The goal of these next days ahead is to find the sliver-crack for a new beginning.

For me, that fragile sliver has already been formed in this congregation. Each one here tonight made a choice to be here. For non-members, you chose to be part of our worship experience and we welcome you into our *chevre*—into our temple family. For temple members—you

chose—you made a conscious decision to remain a part of this congregation. You could have ignored your membership renewal letter. I know some of you, are still poised on the fence—still somewhat uncertain as to the meaning of Village Temple in your lives. Many entered this historic hall with memories of the past—memories that bring smiles and tears of joy and sadness. And yet, on the holiest of days—on this eve of the New Year—as we await tomorrow’s *shofar’s* blast that will stir our hearts-- You sit beside one another and pray in sacred community. The key word for us *is* community—as community we are greater than any One—we are a combination of legacy and promise. Memories of weddings, births, funerals, illness, bnai mitzvah fill this sacred space...life moments that you felt the support and encouragement of your temple family. As you know, the name of our congregation is The Village Temple—Congregation *B’nai Israel* of New York. *B’nai Israel*—the children of Israel—our patriarch Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel after struggling for his life with an angel—he prevailed. So, too for us, we too must struggle with the past—not forgetting the pain, but allowing the memories of community and warmth to prevail.

In Spencer Johnson's bestseller, *Who Moved My Cheese*, Hem declared, "If you do not change, you can become extinct." Similarly if we do not seek, and if we do not dispense forgiveness, there is a great possibility for us becoming emotionally stuck. Indeed, as Junger reminds us, 'it is in community that we find purpose and meaning'. It is in community where we can be bolstered when adversity strikes us down. It is in community that we are nourished and renewed. Those athletes who missed their Olympic mark—found comfort and strength in the hugs and supportive glances of teammates and coaches. I have no doubt, those family members who have joined now at the 9/11 memorial on that tragic anniversary for the past fifteen years, find a communal resilience—are infused with the emotional formula to pursue the future and not the past. On 9/11 our congregant Fred Eichler, helped save the life of Jonathan Judd from the 83rd floor of the North Tower. Each year the two families get together—they don't forget the past but they celebrate the present and gaze toward each other's future.

I want to close this evening the words that I read earlier in this sermon—the heartening words of Sherri Mandel—for they apply not just to our individual selves—but to our communal congregational soul as well.

“Resilience is not overcoming, it’s becoming. Becoming more, becoming our fullest, deepest selves as a result of adversity. We don’t escape, but contemplate and reshape. We don’t leap over troubles as if they don’t exist. We allow them to be our teachers. We experience resilience when we are enlarged rather than diminished by our challenges, when facing adversity causes us to change, grow, and become greater.”

I say to you now and may we say to one another: *Chazak Chazak V’nitchazek*. Be strong—May we be strong—and may we in this New Year of 5777, strengthen one another. *Keyn Yehi Ratzon*.

