

ROSH HASHANAH 5779

RESILIENCE

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1. Good Yontiv. A man named Yaron lives in Israel near the Gaza border. He and the other residents suffer the constant threat and actual barrage of kassam rockets from Gaza. Once Yaron stepped on a metal fork, and absentmindedly put it in his back pocket. Forgetting about the fork, he later sat on it. After wincing in pain, he noticed that he had bent the fork with his tuchus. As a teacher Yaron thought this metal manipulation would be beneficial for ADD students in his school. But then he had an epiphany – he would take the metal from the rockets and turn them into art. “I take the Kassam, the instrument of death, and I change it, I transfer it into something of beauty,” Yaron wrote. He travels the world selling his sculptures, donating the funds to build bomb shelters and to help Israeli soldiers suffering from PTSD. I am proud that Yaron was here at MJC in April, and that many of you supported his efforts. (Show the rose?) As we celebrate Israel’s 70th birthday in 2018, we should be inspired by the resilience of brave people like Yaron.
2. Resilience is the strength and speed of our response to adversity. It’s not something that we automatically have or don’t have, rather it’s a power that we can cultivate. I believe that God created us with the capacity to rebound, to tap a reservoir of emotional

fortitude. I agree with the Psalmist who wrote: I will praise You, O Lord, for You lifted me up ... I cried to You and You healed me ... weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning.” (30:2, 3, 6)

3. I wish all people would recognize their strength, and were as resilient as Yaron, but this is not the case. Millions of Americans are struggling with economic stress, family issues, depression, and other issues. Just one example of how this is manifest is the rate of suicide, which is now the 10th leading cause of death in the U.S. 45,000 Americans took their own lives in 2016, more than twice as many homicides. And this doesn't include all those who attempted it.

4. Why do so many of us have trouble accessing our inner strength? Psychologist Dr. Martin Seligman theorized that resilience depends in part on how we process a setback. He described the “Three P’s”: personalization, permanence, and pervasiveness. Personalization is the belief that you yourself are the problem. Permanence is the notion that the crisis and resulting pain will last forever. And pervasiveness is the belief that a bad event will affect all areas of your life. A resilient man who loses his job, in contrast, grasps that many factors probably led to the loss, it is only temporary, and that it has little to do with other parts of his life. In other words, the right attitude builds resilience.

5. We do not understand everything that happens in life, but we can choose our reaction. If we allow tragedy to stunt our growth, we are denying ourselves one of God's gifts – the ability to *adapt* in the face of adversity. In his book, The Lord is My Shepherd: Healing Wisdom from the 23rd Psalm, Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote, “I have held the hands and dried the tears of people whose marriages have failed or who had been fired from their jobs, and lamented, ‘Why do I have to go through this? I don’t deserve it!’ only to hear them tell me two years later that it was the best thing that ever happened to them. They would never have had the nerve to leave a situation that stunted their souls if they had not been pushed and they were stronger and happier now.” (p.33)

6. In my life I've been fortunate in many ways, and while I have not suffered a personal tragedy, I have had a couple of setbacks. While studying to be a rabbi, I was a part-time chaplain at a Jewish nursing home in New York City. I started as a substitute, preparing to replace the outgoing student who was about to be ordained. One afternoon, I reported for work and was asked to take a physical. What I did not know was that part of the physical was a drug test. What was worse, I had been at a meeting that morning, and I ate a poppy seed muffin. Of course, I tested positive for opium on the drug screen. I tried to explain what I had for breakfast and asked to retake the test. But the facility's policy, only one test per employee, was strictly enforced.

7. I was devastated. Here I was, probably the most straight-laced guy in my entire class, testing positive for drug use. My friends - loved it! For a few weeks, my nickname was 'smack daddy.' The home was to be my student pulpit for Rosh Hashanah, and my job for the year.
8. A professor who was advising me about the situation said, "Michael, you might not want to hear this, but it's going to be okay." He was right on both counts - I did not want to hear that, and it did work out. A small congregation in Pennsylvania was still looking for a rabbi, and I applied and got the job. It led to a wonderful relationship, and I became their rabbi twice a month. After falling I picked myself up, and things improved.
9. I preferred the pulpit more than working at the nursing home. I clung to that first job because it was familiar and safe, but circumstances forced me to take a chance on the unknown. A seemingly mundane breakfast choice pushed me in a new direction, and I am better for it. Thank God for poppy seed muffins.
10. In no way do I mean to make light of addictive substances; many turn to drugs and alcohol as an escape from life's pain. They are hurting themselves, and their families – the damage is tremendous. I wanted to get involved in this fight, so I joined the Board of New Hope Integrated Behavioral Health

Care; now I'm the Secretary. (Marty?) If you know of someone who is addicted or at risk, contact me and I'll see if New Hope can help.

11. It is one thing for a teacher to say, "It'll all work out," to a student who lost a part-time position. But I would not say, "It's for the best" to someone in pain after a tragedy. Instead, I would hug them, listen to them if they wanted to speak, and take solace in the fact that God blessed human beings with the ability to cope. "You will get through this" I would think to myself. Even the Shofar blasts are encouraging. The broken *shevarim* and *teruah* sounds symbolize moments in life when we stumble and fall, yet the Shofar Service ends with a *tekiah g'dolah*, a long, strong blast of triumph.

12. How do we build resilience? In their book, Option B, Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant report on effective strategies. First, try expressing gratitude. In one study, psychologists asked a group of people to make a weekly list of five things for which they were grateful. Sure enough, weeks later they felt happier and reported fewer health problems. Similarly, a struggling person should write down three things she did well each day. Psychologists call this focusing on "small wins." Again, those who did this for a few weeks or months had less stress. Humor helps too by lowering the heart rate and by making stressful situations less threatening. All of this might seem

obvious, but it's easy to overlook our blessings under duress.

13. The women of today's scriptural readings show amazing resilience. Hagar, Avraham's concubine, and Yishmael, their son, were banished into the desert with only a little water and bread. The water ran out, and Hagar feared for their lives. She laid Ishmael down under a bush, so she would not have to see him die, walked away, and burst into tears. But the Lord opened her eyes and she saw a well, and they survived. Hagar was desperate but discovered a way forward.

14. So too Hannah, one of two wives of a man named Elkanah. While the other woman had children, Hannah was barren, a fact that caused her great distress. To make things even worse, the other woman taunted Hannah for her condition. Although Hannah was depressed for years, she ultimately decided to pray fervently for divine mercy. God heeded her call and she had a son – Samuel. She persevered, acted, and her life improved.

15. These biblical narratives remind us that to be Jewish is to be resilient. On Passover we sing the song, "Avadim Hayenu." (sing) We were slaves, there was no hope. But our ancestors cried out to God, and things got better. Pharaoh chased us to the sea, it seemed hopeless, but we survived. We wandered in the wilderness, it seemed hopeless, but we endured.

16. We are a resilient people. Two millennia ago, our ancestors worshipped at the Temple in Jerusalem. They brought animal and plant sacrifices to this holy site to communicate with God. The Romans, however, quashed a Jewish revolt, destroyed the Temple and killed thousands of Jews. Many ancient peoples would have disappeared, but we did not. Instead, the Rabbis of that era shifted the religion's focus, from sacrifice to prayer, study, and performing acts of kindness. There is no denying that the Temple destruction was a horror for our ancestors and for us today. But it made Judaism portable, which is crucial as we reside all over the globe. It compelled our ancestors to reorganize Judaism, and we reap the benefits of a rich and fulfilling religion of ritual and of learning. The destruction compelled us to adapt.

17. The same is true in modern history. We did not let Hitler define us, instead we resisted and survived. Holocaust survivors are among the most resilient people I know. They suffered mightily but emerged from the war and started businesses and families. Where did they find the courage? Survivor and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl wrote, "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." Survivors won, and literally chose life over despair.

18. These are all examples of what psychologists call *Post-Traumatic Growth*. More than half the people who experience trauma report at least one positive change, as opposed to less than 15% who develop PTSD. The changes often include finding personal strength, forming deeper relationships, and seeing new possibilities. A poppy seed muffin led me to redirect my focus. Similarly, adversity can motivate a person to appreciate every day and every loved one more. After 9/11, many Americans became first responders, medical professionals, or joined the military. Applications to Teach for America tripled, because people sought meaning. Again, Viktor Frankl wrote, "...suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning."

19. Once there was a young girl who felt that her life was miserable, so she complained to her father.

Without saying a word, her father took into the kitchen. He filled three pots with water before placing them on high fire. Once the water began boiling, he put potatoes into the first pot, eggs into the second pot, and coffee beans into the last pot. The daughter waited impatiently until the father turned off the fire. He put the potatoes and eggs on separate plates and ladled the coffee into a cup.

"What do you see?" He asked his daughter. "Potatoes, eggs and coffee." she answered. "Touch the potatoes," he said. She did, and they were soft. "Crack an egg."

She did, and it was hard-boiled. Lastly, he asked his daughter to taste the coffee, and its rich flavor brought a smile to her face. Still, she was perplexed and asked, “But Father, what does this mean?” And he explained, “The potatoes, the eggs and coffee beans each faced the same adversity — the boiling water. However, they reacted differently. The potato went in strong, hard and unrelenting, but in boiling water, it became soft and weak. The egg was fragile, until it was subjected to the boiling water, then it became hard. However, the coffee beans were unique. When they were exposed to the boiling water, they changed the water and created something new.”

“So, which one do you want to be?” he continued. “When adversity knocks on your door, how do you respond? Do you want to be a potato, an egg, or a coffee bean?”

20. In this new year, let's make coffee! Even in our struggles, may we remember that God blessed us with inner strength. May we reach our full potential, with hope and optimism, with resilience in the face of challenge. We will continue this theme on Yom Kippur. G'mar chatimah tovah, may you be inscribed in the book of life this year.