

## Resilience in the Face of Adversity - RH Day One - 5779

I decided to open my remarks this morning with some, perhaps familiar, lines from Lewis Carroll's immortal classic, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*:

*Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do ... when suddenly a White Rabbit with pink eyes ran close by her. ... She ran across the field after it and was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole, under the hedge [and] In another moment, down went Alice after it!*

*The rabbit-hole went straight on like a tunnel for some way and then dipped suddenly down, so suddenly that Alice had not a moment to think about stopping herself before she found herself falling down what seemed to be a very deep well. ...*

*Either the well was very deep, or she fell very slowly, for she had plenty of time, as she went down, to look about her. ... Down, down, down! Would the fall never come to an end?*

*Alice felt that she was dozing off, when suddenly, thump! thump! down she came upon a heap of sticks and dry leaves, and the fall was over.*

*[Fortunately] Alice was not a bit hurt, and she jumped up in a moment. ... [Looking up] she found herself in a long, low hall, which was lit up by a row of lamps hanging from the roof. There were doors all 'round the hall, but they were all locked; and when Alice had been all the way down one side and up the other, trying every door, she walked sadly down the middle, wondering how she was ever to get out [of there] again.*

I am guessing that many of us sitting in the room this morning feel ourselves to have fallen down the proverbial "rabbit's hole". Over the past year-and-a-half we have witnessed once-unimaginable changes in the tone of the national discourse, not only politically but also socially. Coarse, derogatory statements that might once have been issued in hushed tones behind closed doors are now echoing from the halls of power, and policies are being promulgated in defiance of decades of precedent.

As striking as these changes have been, one of the most unsettling dimensions of our country's recent tumult is our inability to shift the state-of-affairs left or right using any of the tools that have historically defined civic engagement. Citizens have paraded in the streets, politicians have debated into the wee hours of the morning and media outlets have protested from their various political positions – all, seemingly, to no avail. The status quo – whatever that may mean – seems entrenched or, at least beyond our immediate ability to influence it.

So, what do we do with this "new reality"?

The intellectual class and political strategists have numerous strategies to offer, and indeed, their suggestions may prove well-advised in the long term. But they do not speak to the soul-sapping reality of waking every day to a world that departs so markedly from our hopes and expectations. They do not address how to live with the abiding sense of hopelessness or powerlessness that many are experiencing. For that, I suggest, the place to turn is our tradition.

While I dare say many, perhaps, most of us in this room, have been raised with the understanding that Judaism is a religion that demands action. In the face of injustice or suffering, our faith calls upon us to effect change, to right the wrong.

But we should not forget that ours is a civilization that has withstood not merely decades, but centuries -- millennia -- of adversity, often under circumstances that we were utterly powerless to change.

Generations of Jews persevered under conditions that make the trials and tribulations of our own day look like a cake-walk. So, it is not surprising that Judaism has advice, frameworks, to offer that can guide us in weathering challenges that may not prove -- at least in the near term -- surmountable, and doing so in a way that preserves our integrity and sense of purpose.

One of those frameworks is illustrated by the very text that we read this morning: the story of Hagar and Ishmael's expulsion into the wilderness. Talk about *tsuris*! Can you imagine being thrown out of your home, cast into an empty desert with only a loaf of bread and a skin of water as provisions? Who is supposed to help you? Who can you rely on?

Who but God? *Adonai Ro'-i* ("the God who Sees Me"), as God is referred to uniquely in this passage.

Hagar and Ishmael's response to withering adversity was faith. Theirs is a blind, indeed, irrational faith that buoys them in the face of calamity.

Ishmael, lying on the desert floor, miles from any human habitation, out of the reach of any plausible source of mortal succor, calls out -- to God -- in the belief that the Source of Life, Embodiment of Mercy cannot remain indifferent to the child's plight. And he is right.

While God does not, in this instance, materially intervene to change the couple's circumstances, the couple's faith in God acts on *them*, enabling them to glimpse and then grasp resources -- a pool of water -- that had heretofore eluded them. In the words of the Biblical text, "God lifted Hagar's eyes so that she could see the [by implication, pre-existing] well."

Hagar and Ishmael's faith is a life-preserver that carries them to the surface, to a place where they can breathe and therefore see and think and act.

"But, Rabbi," I hear you arguing, "The story of Hagar and Ishmael is just that. It is a story. Perhaps it never happened, and even if it did that is not the way that people behave in real life. Real people don't persist on blind faith."

The Aish Kodesh *was* real. His name in life was Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira. He was the Grand Rabbi of Piaseczno, Poland and founder of the Da'as Moshe Yeshiva, one of the largest Jewish academies in Warsaw during the period between the First and Second World Wars. But then the war broke out ...

In the first rounds of German air raids on his city, Rabbi Shapira's neighborhood was bombed and his only son, daughter-in-law and sister-in-law were killed. It got worse. When the Nazis invaded Poland in October 1940, Rabbi Shapira and his students were rounded up and interned in the Warsaw Ghetto, where they faced extreme deprivation, horrific oppression, and constant fear.

A "rational" individual might have abandoned their faith and their religious practices at that time, and indeed, Rabbi Shapira found his faith sorely tested as documented in his teachings. But he resolutely believed that the horror and destruction that surrounded him could not to be the final legacy of a people created by a loving, compassionate God.

So, Rabbi Shapira continued to write ... to write and to teach. He recorded his commentaries on the weekly parshah in a thin notebook, which he buried in a milk-can amidst the rubble as the Ghetto was being liquidated.

This itself was a monumental act of faith! To think that in the waning hours as he was waiting to be deported to a forced labor camp (Rabbi Shapira was spared immediate deportation to Treblinka), having witnessed the death of most of his immediate family members, his students, neighbors, friends, Rabbi Shapira could believe that there would be an audience for Torah at some future date! What *chutzpah*!

It turns out Rabbi Shapira's faith was grounded. Although he, himself, did not survive the war -- he was shot to death in November 1943, possibly on the eve of a planned uprising against the Nazi -- his manuscript, known as the *Aish Kodesh* ("Holy Fire") survived. It was discovered by a construction worker during the redevelopment of the ghetto precinct, more than a decade after his passing and upon publication enjoyed a meteoric rise in popularity.

The *Aish Kodesh* -- a title now applied both to the book and its author -- has inspired millions. It has been held up as "one of the most important sustained engagements with the problem of evil and *hester panim* (when God conceals His presence) in Jewish history".

So, it might be said that this one man's successful effort to maintain faith, a belief in God and in the overwhelming goodness of Creation, in the face of appalling odds has become a life-preserver for the generations.

So, faith is one avenue that our tradition offers to those seeking to make meaning in circumstances of soul-numbing adversity and institutional inertia. But what can Judaism offer to those of us whose inner piety cannot sustain this? What does the Jewish tradition offer as advice to those of a more prosaic character (amongst whom I count myself)?

While I am sure the term "prosaic" has seldom been applied to Henrietta Szold, founder of Hadassah, inspirational teacher, writer and Zionist, her actions do model a second, fundamentally Jewish approach to doing meaningful work in circumstances where more comprehensive reform seems impossible.

By contrast to Hagar and Ishmael or the *Aish Kodesh*, Szold's circumstances were quiet comfortable and accommodating. Her father was a rabbi and a scholar, and she was his chief assistant and intellectual heir. But as a woman living in late 19<sup>th</sup> century society, there was no question of her pursuing these callings herself. Instead, she became a high school teacher, eventually opening a "night school" for newly arrived immigrants that grew to enroll more than 900 students!

Though she could not publish in her own name, Szold was tapped for the board of the prestigious Jewish Publication Society (JPS) at the time of its inception – the only woman so honored. In her capacity as translator and editor, she was centrally involved in the production of seminal works including Heinrich Graetz's *History of the Jews*, Louis Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews*, and Marcus Jastrow's *Talmudic Dictionary* (the work that I and probably every person in this room who has studied Talmud has used as their primary reference).

But Szold's defining contribution and life-consuming passion was, of course, Zionism. After witnessing the tremendous poverty of the *Yishuv*, during a visit to the pre-state Jewish settlement in 1909, Szold founded a "women's auxiliary" to the male-dominated Zionist organizations of the day. Within a decade her group, now known as "Hadassah" had grown to dwarf most of its male counterparts.

While the iconic Zionist organizations of the day focused on financial and political concerns, Szold's (and Hadassah's) emphasis was on basic human needs. They established a system of visiting nurses which over time evolved into the Hadassah Medical Organization, one of the most important providers of health services to Jewish residents of mandatory Palestine. And Szold was also involved in the

establishment of a network of Youth villages to receive unaccompanied children whom she (correctly) forecast would be arriving in droves from Europe.

Szold's pragmatic, localized approach to effecting change probably grew organically from the circumstances in which she found herself. But she nevertheless exemplifies the approach to change-making spelled out by the Rambam (Maimonides) in his seminal legal compendium, the Mishneh Torah.

According to the Rambam Jews should dispense *tzedakah* ("charity") – a term that includes donations both in kind (time and volunteer efforts) and cash (monetary assistance) – with an eye to effecting change locally. Give to the poor in your own community, assist the needy in your circle of acquaintances, provide opportunities to those with whom you are in direct contact. These are the Rambam's dictates.

While I dare say, none of us will equal the prodigious accomplishments of Henrietta Szold, we nevertheless have the opportunity to make a tangible difference within the spheres that we frequent, within the circle of people whom we can touch. While we may not be able to prevail on Homeland Security to change their policies on immigration, we can affect the experiences of newly-settled immigrants in our community; while we cannot halt the assault on the nation's schools or efforts to undermine their curricula, we can see to it that children in our community who are struggling to master the requirements get the additional assistance they need to prevail; while we cannot rewrite the nation's gun laws or push back against a culture that idolizes violence, we can involve ourselves in after-school programs that steer at-risk youth away from criminal involvement or that help re-integrate past offenders into society in a productive, stabilizing capacity.

The impact of these involvements may never grow to global proportions in the way that Szold's did, but they are meaningful, nevertheless. They yield tangible benefits not only the overt targets of the assistance but the participants themselves with a concrete source of hope and sense of purpose.

What is more, participation in this form plays into our (literally) religious obligation to partner with God in the betterment of the world, surmised in the oft-quoted verse from Pirkei Avot:

*Lo aleikha ham'lakha ligmor, v'lo atah bein horin l'hivatel mimenu.*

"It is not your obligation to complete the work [of perfecting the world], but neither are you from to desist from it."

The third and final Jewish approach to dealing with unyielding obstacles that I would like to discuss with you this morning is best exemplified not by any one individual, but by the tradition writ large. Judaism itself has experienced various moments of crisis, times when it looked like there was no way forward for our civilization -- and yet we have survived.

What is the key to Judaism's survival when the empires of Rome and Egypt have fallen? Why are there still individuals professing to practice the religion of Moses when every material reminder of his existence has vanished?

I believe that the answer to this question lies in Judaism's innate creativity and flexibility. As evidence of this, I would like to cite two ways in which Judaism has failed to persevere. The first of these, which I come up in conflict with every time I perform a Jewish wedding, is the religion of the Biblical prophet Moses (*da'at Moshe*).

The religion of Moses is no longer. Not just the religion of Moses and Aaron, but also the religion of the Judges, the Prophets, the Sanhedrin. All of these historic leaders presided over a Judaism that was based on a cult of sacrifice. That died -- irrevocably -- when the Romans plowed our Temple into the ground in 70 CE.

But Judaism did not die. Judaism survived because even while the Second Temple was still standing, some creative thinkers within our ranks had begun to ask the question, "What is our ritual life and moral tradition *really* about?" They problematized the very foundations of the Jewish endeavor and discerned that our Temple rituals were, fundamentally, a set of tools for communing with God. So, they defined their own toolkit for doing this: prayer. Prayer did not require a Temple or a priestly cult or the amassed resources of a geographically concentrated population.

The early rabbis, did an end-run -- and not only around the Roman legions (which had not yet been called upon to besiege the city of Jerusalem. They did an end-run around *any* power that would try to eradicate the Jewish faith by means of military conquest. You cannot contain *avodat ha-lev* ("the service of the heart," a common way of referencing prayer) with an army.

Fast-forward about sixteen hundred years in Jewish history. Now the threat to Judaism's survival, particularly in Central Europe, is not a stick, but a carrot. Jews are leaving Judaism in droves because there is now a way out. The modern, secular world has begun to accept individuals as "citizens," as non-descript members of the broader society, simply on the basis of their accepting the norms of mainstream life.

Shave your beard (if you're a man), stop wearing ethnically distinctive garb, speak the vernacular and study in secular universities or join professional guilds and you can be one of us? But can you still be Jewish? That was a real question in the mid-eighteenth century. Jews had never (in significant numbers) dressed and spoken and acted like members of the surrounding gentile society. They had never socialized broadly outside their Jewish enclaves. How could you do such things and retain the integrity of our belief system, our heritage?

The answer to these questions was the Haskalah ("Jewish Enlightenment"). It was, again, a radical rethinking of what it meant to be Jewish, from the core. Haskalah thinkers, including the founders of the Reform (and later, Conservative) and Modern Orthodox movements had to ask themselves probing questions about the very nature of the Jewish endeavor. They had to discern what, for each of these traditions, would come to be defined as the essential pillars of a Jewish life and then to translate these into a revised code of conduct, network of institutions, set of texts, system of education, etc.

And you know what? As daunting an endeavor as that has proven (and it is still, to some extent, a project underway), it has worked. Those of us sitting in this room, dressed apart from our kippot and tallitot much like our non-Jewish neighbors with whom we study and work and fraternize, and yet gathered in this room on this Rosh Hashanah morning to re-enact our people's most sacred traditions -- we are the proof that it is possible to live with a foot in each world.

It is not easy to envision a "third path"; to figure out what your core goals, purposes, and values are; what defines you as a person and what resources -- internal and external -- you need to sustain that over the long-term. But in a sense, much of the work that has been assigned to us in this season, the work of *teshuvah* boils down to identifying your key priorities.

What if you were to do that work this year with one additional twist? In addition to asking yourself, "What is it really important that I accomplish -- or work towards -- this year (this life?)" You added the question, "And how might I make progress towards that endpoint through a less conventional path?"

Might that line of thinking help to get you "unstuck" from the morass in which you now find yourself?

Faith. Keeping sight of the fact that the things you value are immortal and that they are worth holding onto even if their realization is delayed.

Incremental action. Doing what you can, where you can, when you can.

Creativity. Thinking outside the box and finding alternative avenues to achieving your core goals without getting caught up in the obstacles of the present.

These are three solutions that Judaism offers us to deal with the dispiritude of our time. Not just of our time, of any time, for the problem itself is timeless.

We are living in "interesting" times, a blessing and a curse, as we well know. But what if we were to seize upon the bequest of our culture to take this upon ourselves as a challenge? What if we were to adopt the perspective of Alice who, upon finding herself in a situation without precedent declared:

*"Curiouser and curiouser!" ... How queer everything is to-day! ... Was I the same when I got up this morning? But if I'm not the same, ... 'Who in the world am I?'"*

And with that in mind, let us set about surmounting the challenges of our own day together.