

Rosh HaShanah Day 2 sermon:

**Bouncing Back (or Even Forward) from Bad Times:**

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**PTSD.** Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Historically, some of the other terms that were used for this complicated and debilitating psychological disorder include "soldier's heart", "shell shock", "battle fatigue," and "combat neurosis." In its initial formulation, a "traumatic" event was conceptualized as a catastrophic stressor such as war, torture, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Holocaust, natural disasters such as earthquakes and hurricanes, & human-made disasters such as serious car accidents and plane crashes.

Although the American Psychiatric Association used to have a narrow definition of PTSD, mental health professionals have come to realize that this condition can arise from any kind of intensely disturbing encounter. One clinician, the Israeli psychologist **Alton Birnbaum**, has even diagnosed the biblical patriarch, Yaakov, with PTSD.

In an article that he wrote in 2005, Birnbaum analyzed Chapters 25-50 in the Book of Genesis (*B'raisheet*) and made the case that our patriarch Yaakov suffered from chronic PTSD. According to Birnbaum, the death of Yaakov's beloved wife, Rachel, was a catastrophic trauma from which he never recovered. What made the event especially traumatic for him was that he lost the love of his life so suddenly and unexpectedly, at the precise moment of expected joy, the birth of their long-awaited son, Binyamin. Being left with an orphaned infant and his older sibling, Yosef, may have been some source of consolation to Yaakov, but, having to take care of them while mourning his mourning, was an additional causes of stress and grief. The biblical text points to Yaakov's initial reaction of helplessness following Rachel's death, as evidenced by his failure to bury his wife in *M'arat Ha-Machpelah* along with Avraham & Sara, Yitzchak & Rivkah. Instead of burying her along with the other matriarchs & patriarchs in the family burial cave in Hebron, he buries her haphazardly on the road to Bethlehem, very close to the spot where she died in childbirth. The biblical text supports the existence of PTSD symptoms in our patriarch in later years as well, including avoidance and

numbing, as well as a pathological preference for & hyper-vigilance over Rachel's sons, Binyamin and Yosef.

The case can be made that Yaakov's father, **Yitzchak**, had also suffered from PTSD. Applying modern psychological diagnostic criteria to the biblical text, it may be inferred that the trauma that triggered this disorder for Yitzchak was a catastrophic event that is described in the section of the Torah portion, **Parashat VaYera, Genesis 22**, that we read every year on the second day of Rosh HaShanah. The trauma of which I speak is *Akedat Yitzchak*, the Binding and Near-Sacrifice of Isaac. God says to Avraham, "*Kach na et bincha, et y'chidcha, asher ahavta, et Yitzchak*"

"Take now your son, your only son, the one you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah and bring him up there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell you."

As traumatic as it might have been for Avraham to be commanded to sacrifice his son, just think about how traumatic this event must have been for Yitzchak, whose dad placed him on the altar atop a bundle of firewood & then raised a knife to slaughter him. Just imagine how traumatic it must have been to see that knife poised overhead, about to plunge into Yitzchak's helpless body, until an angel intervened and stopped Avraham from going through with the sacrifice. To be in a situation of physical danger is enough of a source of trauma in and of itself, but for the danger to be imposed by someone you trust and love, someone with whom you are supposed to feel safe, I cannot even imagine the feelings of helplessness that Yitzchak must have experienced.

In a modern-day re-telling of *Akedat Yitzchak* by **Rabbi Edward Schechter** (in *God Loves Stories* pp. 50-52), Yitzchak expresses the following thoughts and feelings about that horrific experience, "I couldn't believe he would go through with it. How could a father take a knife and plunge it into the heart of his son? But I saw the look in his eyes- he was going to do it- he was a madman." (p. 51)

Avraham might have (or might not have been) diagnosed as a “madman,” but Yitzchak undoubtedly suffered psychological harm as a result of his experience on Mount Moriah.

**I wonder if Yitzchak ever recovered or bounced back after that trauma.**

From the Torah’s depiction of Yitzchak after this event, I would venture to say that he didn’t. Compared to his wife Rivkah, who was a ‘take the bull by its horns’ assertive woman, Isaac seemed especially passive. Unlike Rivkah, who was a woman of action, shlepping water back and form from the well for her future father-in-law’s servant and camels, a woman of action who orchestrated her son Yaakov’s acquisition of his brother Esau’s birthright and of his father’s deathbed blessing, Yitzchak seemed to be a man who was acted upon rather than as a man who initiated action. In fact, when Yitzchak was on his deathbed, the Torah describes him as being blind.

Perhaps he was not only blind in a physical sense, but also a man who may have had psychological blinders on as a direct result of the traumatic experience of the *Akedah*. Perhaps as a result of being ‘blind-sided’ by his father on Mount Moriah, Yitzchak ultimately became a man who was blind to others’ manipulations, including those of his wife Rivkah and their son, Yaakov. Perhaps the reason Rivkah and Yaakov were able to get away with their subterfuge was, not only because Yitzchak’s physical blindness prevented him from seeing that it was Yaakov standing in front of him, but also because Yitzchak chose to turn a blind eye to what was happening to him, refusing to take responsibility for the future of his children, embracing the role of helpless victim. Perhaps after such a traumatic event as the *Akedah*, Yitzchak was never able to truly recover. And we know that many people who have experienced traumas in modern times have also not recovered. Many victims of trauma suffer from chronic PTSD or have otherwise failed to bounce back.

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However, not everyone who experiences trauma suffers from PTSD. Not everyone who experiences adversity fails to bounce back. In yesterday’s sermon, I described the trauma that FaceBook executive **Sheryl Sandberg** experienced when

her husband, Dave, died suddenly and unexpectedly at the age of 47. The very fact that she continued to get out of bed every morning, raise her children, go back to work, and go on to write a book about her experiences indicates some evidence of Sheryl's **resilience** in the face of tragic loss. Somehow, she was able to **rebound** after trauma.

In his book, **Rebounders: How Winners Pivot From Setback to Success**, **Rick Newman** contrasts the characteristics of "rebounders." and "wallowers." Unlike "wallowers", who tend to complain or blame somebody else for their misfortunes, "rebounders" focus more on solving problems and confronting life's challenges head on. Unlike "wallowers," who tend to get stuck and feel helpless when confronted with misfortune and hardship, "rebounders" have the skills to **bounce back** from adversity.

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Surprisingly enough, there are some people who have demonstrated the ability, not only to **bounce back** from trauma, but to actually **bounce forward**. In a 2001 study by UNC Charlotte professors **Richard Tedeschi & Lawrence Calhoun** (cited in Sandberg p. 78), in which they interviewed and observed **grieving parents**, the researchers found that while some parents suffered from chronic PTSD, and while others seemed to have rebounded after mourning the loss of their children, there appeared to be yet another type of parental reaction to the trauma of the death of one's child. Some parents actually experienced **post-traumatic growth**.

**Tedeschi and Calhoun** found that **post-traumatic growth could take 5 different forms:**

- 1) finding personal strength, **2) gaining appreciation,**
- 3) forming deeper relationships,
- 4) seeing new possibilities, & 5) discovering more meaning in life.**

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Since this is merely a High Holidays sermon and not a full-day self-help seminar, I would like to concentrate the rest of my remarks on 3 of these forms of post-traumatic growth & put them in a Jewish context.

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The first area of growth that **Tedeschi and Calhoun** identified is **GAINING APPRECIATION**. For some parents, losing a child actually encouraged them to appreciate and be grateful for the rest of their family. A case in point (cited in Sandberg pp. 81-82): In 2012, a woman named Marina Krimm took her 3-year old daughter, Nessie, for a swimming lesson. When Marina returned to their apartment after the lesson, a horrific sight awaited them: their nanny had stabbed her 6-year old daughter, Lulu, and 2-year old son, Leo, to death. Years later, Marina and her husband, Kevin, somehow managed to **"bounce forward"** from the depths of tragedy and despair. Kevin said, "He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how." He felt grateful that his 3-year old daughter, Nessie, had survived and that his marriage was strong. Eventually, **Kevin and Marina Krimm** decided to have more children and they felt fortunate that they were able to do so. They also started a non-profit organization that teaches creative arts to disadvantaged kids. Kevin and Marina found "post-traumatic growth" by adding more love and beauty to the world.

In commenting about her own post-traumatic growth after the death of her husband, Sheryl Sandberg wrote (p. 82), "It is the irony of all ironies to experience tragedy and come out of it feeling more grateful. Since I lost Dave, I have at my fingertips this unbelievable reservoir of sadness. It's right next to me where I can touch it---part of my daily life. But alongside that sadness, I have a much deeper appreciation for what I used to take for granted: family, friends, and simply being alive. ....My mom offered a helpful comparison. For 66 years, she never thought twice about walking, but as she aged, her hip deteriorated and walking became painful. After hip replacement surgery..., she feels grateful for every step she is able to take without pain./ What she feels on a physical level, I feel on an emotional level. On the days that I'm OK, I now appreciate that I'm walking without [emotional] pain."

One of the many ways that our Jewish tradition facilitates an **attitude of gratitude** is by providing us with **blessings** to say on just about every occasion. There is a blessing you can say before eating an apple, as well as a blessing to recite to express gratitude for waking up in the morning. There are ***b'rachot*** to recite before hearing the shofar on Rosh HaShanah and ***b'rachot*** to recite after hearing thunder.

"*Benching Gomer*" is an opportunity to say a blessing after surviving a life-threatening situation (such as surgery, a dangerous trip, or the aftermath of a hurricane as serious as Harvey or Irma). "*Zocher ha-brit*" is a blessing we can say upon seeing a rainbow. There are even specific ***b'rachot*** that you can say when you see the Mediterranean Sea or when you meet up with a friend you haven't seen for over a year. Reciting blessings provides us with an opportunity to acknowledge the blessings in our lives out loud.

Acknowledging the blessings in our lives can be a blessing in and of itself. The Jewish value of saying ***b'rachot*** comes to teach us the importance of **holding on to gratitude**; it reminds us what we have to be grateful for & what there is to **appreciate, even after we have suffered a trauma.**

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Another area of post-traumatic growth that Tedeschi and Calhoun identified is **SEEING NEW POSSIBILITIES.** The disappearance of one reality can free us to imagine a new reality. In Sheryl Sandberg's words (p. 91), "After tragedy, we sometimes miss these opportunities because we spend all of our emotional energy wishing for our old lives." As **Helen Keller** put it, "When one door of happiness closes, another opens, but often, we look so long at the closed door, that we do not see the one which has been opened for us."

There is an example of this form of post-traumatic growth at the communal level in the **Talmud (Masechet Gittin)** & the **Midrash on Pirkei Avot known as Avot d'Rabbi Natan**: When the Roman Emperor Vespasian came to destroy Jerusalem and the Temple in the year 70 C.E., Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai asked his students to make him a coffin and sneak him out of the besieged city in it. After successfully getting out of Jerusalem, the great rabbi approached Vespasian & said, "*Ten li Yavneh*

*v'chachameyha.*” “Give me the city of Yavneh and its sages.” “Please grant me permission to go to Yavneh and set up a yeshivah there, where I can study with my disciples, institute prayer, and perform God’s commandments.” RYBZ’s request was granted. And it is in Yavneh that the study of Oral Law (“*Torah she-b’al peh*”) took place, in Yavneh that the Mishnah took shape, and in Yavneh that Talmudic culture came to replace Temple culture. This rabbinic story comes to teach us that the Jewish people in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine found a way not only to survive as a people after the Destruction of the Temple & Jerusalem, but also to thrive.

It is hard to imagine just how traumatic *Churban Ha-Bayit*, the Destruction of the Temple, was for the Jews. Until then, the *Beyt HaMikdash* had been the central axis of Jewish life. This is where everyone made pilgrimage 3 times a year to offer sacrifices in celebration of the holidays of Passover, Sukkot, & Shavuot. This is the place where people came to feel close to God. The destruction of this sacred place was devastating. But, rather than wallowing in despair, the Jewish people managed not only to rebound from this traumatic experience, but to actually flourish. They not only bounced back from this trauma; they bounced forward. Sure, they expressed acute pain as a result of their loss. However, because of the foresight of leaders like RYBZ, the people found a way to move on and create a new way of being after the Temple was gone; they replaced sacrifices with other ways to get close to God, including Jewish learning, prayer, and acts of loving kindness (*Torah, avodah, & gemilut chasadim*). The People of the Temple became the People of the Book. They dealt with the trauma of the destruction by securing institutions of learning and dedicating themselves to the practices that would allow Jewish life to endure and flourish for thousands of years to come.

In another section of the **Talmud** (namely **Mashechet B’rachot 3a**), Rabbi Yossi tells the following story: “I was once traveling on the road, and I entered into one of the ruins of Jerusalem in order to pray. Eliyahu HaNavi, Elijah the Prophet of blessed memory, appeared and waited for me at the door until I finished my prayer. After I finished my prayer, he said to me, “*Shalom alecha, Rabbi*”  
“Peace be with you, my rabbi!”

& I replied: "*Shalom alecha, Rabbi u-mori*"

"Peace be with you, my rabbi and teacher!"

And he asked me: "*B'ni*, my son, why did you go into this ruin?"

I replied: "To pray".

He said to me: "You ought to have prayed on the road".

I replied: "I feared lest passers-by might interrupt me".

He said to me: "You ought to have said an abbreviated prayer".

Thus, I (Rabbi Yossi) learned from him (Eliyahu HaNavi) 3 things:

- 1) "*she-eyn nichnasin la-churvah*"-one must not go into a ruin;
- 2) "*she-mitpalelin ba-derech*"- one should/may pray while on the road"&
- 3) "*she-ha-mitpalel ba-derech mit-palel t'fillah k'tzarah*"- if one does say his prayer on the road, he should recite an abbreviated prayer

What is the meaning of the first lesson that Rabbi Yossi learned? What does it mean "***she-eyn nichnasin la-churvah***" ("that one must not go into a ruin."). I believe that the Rabbis must have found meaning in this lesson that went beyond its literal meaning. After all, Rabbis and other Jews throughout the ages have treasured the opportunity to daven as close as they could to the site of the ruins of the former Temple; davening in Jerusalem at the Kotel is considered meritorious, not something to be avoided. According to my teacher, **Rabbi Harlan Wechsler**, the deeper meaning of Rabbi Yossi's teaching is that we should **not live in the metaphorical 'ruins' of our lives**. That is, we should **not wallow** in the disasters that have befallen us. We have to strive to **move beyond the 'ruins'**; we need to move on "*ba-derech*" ("along the road") of recovery and healing, rather than dwelling in the "*churvah*" ("ruins").

Just as Judaism and the Jewish community **rebounded and thrived after the traumatic** Destruction of the Temple in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, we too have the potential to rebound and grow after experiencing trauma in our personal lives.

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The final area of post-traumatic growth that I would like to address today that was identified by Tedeschi and Calhoun in their study of bereaved parents is what they refer to as "**DISCOVERING MORE MEANING IN LIFE**" (Sandberg pp. 86-87). After the trauma of losing a child, many of the parents in Tedeschi & Calhoun's study found a **stronger sense of purpose**, rooted in a belief that their existence had significance beyond themselves.

Family and religion can be the greatest sources of meaning for people. Striving to feel more connected to our family, to God, and to a spiritual community can lead to post-traumatic growth.

Belonging to or becoming more involved in a congregation provides us with the opportunity to connect with God and a spiritual community. In the words of **Rabbi Alan Lew z"l**, "That's what a synagogue is. It isn't a building, nor a clubhouse, nor a place where we can focus on doing Jewish things and being Jewish as if Judaism were some sort of hobby.... No, the synagogue is a *gesher*, a bridge to our souls, the place where we connect to our souls."

**Believing in a higher power and feeling part of something larger than ourselves** reminds us that we are not the center of the universe. Rather than assuming that you are the one who has to fix things, try to hold on to faith in God. It's not about praying to God to fix everything. It's knowing that, when you are in the darkest hours, you can stay hopeful and strive to embrace the words of Psalm 23, "*Gam ki elech b'Gey Tzal-mavet, lo ira ra, ki Atah imadi.*"

"Lo, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall not fear evil, because You, [God], are [always] with me."

It's knowing that, in the wake of trauma, you can strive to embrace the words of **Psalm 27**, which we add to our morning & evening prayer services from the beginning of the month of Elul until the end of the High Holiday season:

**"Luleh he-emanti lirot b'tuv Adonai b'eretzh chayim.**

**Kaveh el Adonai chazak v'yaametz libecha v'kaveh el Adonai."**

**"Oh that my faith was such that I could see the goodness of God in the land of the living.**

**Believe in God. Be strong and have courage & hope in Adonai."**

According to Rhonda Rosenheck, former principal of the Prozdor Hebrew-High School program at JTS, the phrase, **"the land of the living" ("eretzh chayim"), refers to the "real world", in which "both evil and good exist simultaneously"**. In an article that Rosenheck wrote in the fall of 2001, shortly after the deadly terrorist attacks on **September 11**, she wrote about the aftermath of this communal tragedy in the context of her own personal tragedies. Rhonda's father died in a plane crash when he was only 50 years old, and Rhonda was only 24. In that same year, other special people in Rhonda's life died, including her grandfather, two great uncles, her personal mentor, and the "love of her life". So, **how was Rhonda able to move beyond the traumatic *churvah* of these losses?**

In Rhonda's words, "A friend once asked me: How can you be such a realist yet be so hopeful?" Rhonda's answer to her friend was as follows: "Why do you assume that I have to deny the full range of reality ("the land of the living" "*eretzh chayim*") to believe that the world is full of goodness?..... Sometimes, we all know, dreadful things happen. Sometimes evil seems to gain the upper hand..... But, like the psalmist (of Psalm 27), I work at seeing the good of God in the "land of the living." Rhonda's belief in God helped her **bounce forward** after a pile-up of traumatic experiences.

May we learn from **Rhonda Rosenheck's** example, as well as from the examples of **Sheryl Sandberg, Kevin & Marina Krimm**, the **bereaved parents of Tedeschi and Calhoun's study, Rabbi Yossi**, and **Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai** after the Destruction of the Temple. Unfortunately, **many of us have experienced traumas in our lives**: Some have suffered the death of a father, mother, sibling, significant other, or child. Others have had to deal with (or are still dealing with) serious illnesses, ranging from cancer to ALS. Some have had major surgeries (or are scheduled to have surgery in the near future). Others are struggling with infertility. Some have had to deal with the loss of a job or other setbacks in their financial situation. Others have had to deal with major disappointments in their professional or personal lives. Some have been physically or emotionally abused by their parents. Others have been betrayed by people they trusted. Many have been **traumatized by these types of experiences**.

In this New Year of 5778, I pray that we all **find a way to deal with the traumas** that have come our way or that will come our way. While giving ourselves some time to grieve our losses and other tragedies, may we not wallow in the *churvah* of these dark traumatic places for too long. I pray that we **find ways to bounce back or, better yet, bounce forward in the year ahead**.

*Ken yehi ratzon.*

*L'Shanah Tovah u-Metukah.*