

We Are Survivors

G'mar Chatimah Tovah – May we all be sealed for a good year.

Several years ago, a congregant, feeling very repentant, visited with me during Sukkot: “Cantor, last week, I missed saying Birkat Hamazon, grace after meals.” I asked him, “Why?” “Because I forgot to wash my hands on the bread before the meal. “That’s twice you’ve broken the law, but you still haven’t told me why.” “The food wasn’t kosher.” “You ate non-kosher food?” “It wasn’t a Jewish restaurant.” “That makes it even worse, couldn’t you have eaten in a kosher one?” “What, on Yom Kippur?”

Yom Kippur is a sacred day to the vast majority of Jews. Numerous people who rarely attend services nonetheless find their way into a sanctuary or a service on this day. We take the day off from school, from work, we don our best clothing and join together in beating our chests. We give up food and drink, question which pills to take and turn our lives upside down. In Israel, with its significant secular population, cars are not found on the roads on Yom Kippur. The whole country is quiet and the secular and the religious, in some fascinating way, observe this day together.

But why? Is it learned behavior or is it possibly something even deeper, something inborn, something within our genetic makeup? In the last two centuries, there’s been a great deal of research on heredity, and on what can and cannot transfer over the generations. In 2013, Brian Dias, a postdoctoral researcher at Emory University, wondered if mice might pass down memories. Each day, Dias put young male mice in a chamber into which he periodically pumped a chemical called acetophenone. It has an aroma that reminds some people of almonds. The mice sniffed the acetophenone for ten seconds, upon which Dias jolted their feet with a mild electric shock. *Probably not a PETA approved method!*

Five training sessions a day for three days was enough for the mice to associate the almond smell with the shock. When Dias gave the trained mice a whiff of acetophenone, they tended to freeze in their tracks. Dias also found that acetophenone’s smell made the mice more prone to become startled at a loud noise.

Ten days after the training ended, they collected genetic material from the mice and inseminated female mice. Surprisingly, like their fathers, the new generation of mice was sensitive to acetophenone. Smelling it made them more likely to get

startled by a loud sound, even though Dias had not trained the mice to make that association. When Dias allowed this new generation of mice to mate, the grandchildren of the original frightened males also exhibited a sensitivity to acetophenone. If learned behaviors can be passed down genetically, then generations of Jews, honoring the High Holidays by feasting and fasting, repenting, and coming to synagogue, have transferred their reverence for these days onto us.

Which raises the very-real question: what other behaviors and characteristics have been passed down to us through the generations? There are those that say Jews are a smarter “race” than others. Some South Koreans think so, for across their country there’s a fancy for Talmudic learning. Wanting to imitate our venerated educational model, South Koreans are learning *chevruta* style, which is one-on-one, out-loud partner learning as is done in yeshivot.

In an article in the Times of Israel entitled, “Talmud inspired-learning craze sweeps South Korea”, Seoul-based student Choi Jae-Young related, “*Jews account for just 0.2 percent of the world’s population, but 23 percent of Nobel Prize winners have been Jewish. And despite all the time and money we spend on education, only one Korean has ever won a Nobel award. That irks many Koreans. It makes us want to learn the Jews’ secrets.*” The result is dozens of private chavruta-themed academies throughout South Korea, catering to everyone from toddlers to adults.

Forgive me, but I’m a bit skeptical. I doubt whether Talmud-style learning is causatively related to earning a Nobel prize. I’ve known a lot of Talmudic scholars; many of them didn’t even go to college.

Nonetheless, study and learning seem to be a very real Jewish passion. With the advent of Covid has come a technological revolution enabling many more people to participate from home. As a result, many of Brith Shalom classes have grown from 10 to 20, from 30 to 50 and from 50 to 75 or more. Friends and family around the country have joined us on our Jewish learning journeys. Given the opportunity – whether inbred or learned, we turn, we return to Jewish study. It is simply who we are.

Mark Twain, noted something unique about the Jewish people and its survival. In 1897, he wrote: “*If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one-quarter of one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous puff of stardust lost in the*

blaze of the Milky Way. Properly, the Jew ought hardly to be heard of, but he is heard of, has always been heard of.

He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk. His contributions to the world's list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine and abstruse learning are also very out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers.

The Egyptians, the Babylonians and the Persians rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greeks and Romans followed and made a vast noise, and they were gone; other people have sprung up and held their torch high for a time but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, and have vanished.

The Jew saw them all, survived them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert but aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jews; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?"

Yes - what is the secret of our immortality? I think Twain mentioned it: we are survivors. Not just of the Holocaust but from domination by Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, Greece, Rome, and Russia. In medieval Europe, we persevered through Crusades, Inquisitions, and Expulsions. We suffered from blood libels, charges of desecrating the host, of poisoning wells, and international conspiracies as well as pogroms. And the modern State of Israel has faced constant attacks, and threats of attacks, from its surrounding neighbors in its 73-year history.

We are a people whose very formation occurred under pressure and duress. As Deuteronomy describes: *"And God took you from the Iron furnace, from Egypt, to be your God, an inheritance as of this day."* Like metal that's placed in the furnace to be purified, we were strengthened. And for good or for bad, that pressure has persisted for 3000 years.

So, what is the secret to our survival; to our strength? The secret is fortitude that has either been learned or naturally selected into us over the years. Our convictions, our chutzpah and our stubbornness have enabled us to survive and thrive. This last trait, stubbornness, was even pointed out by Moses. After the Sin of the Golden Calf, Moses petitioned God, *"You need to forgive these people and*

restore your presence among them for they are a stiff-necked people.” Moses was saying, yes, the Israelites sin, but stick with these people, for they are stubborn and will use that trait to remain loyal to you through thick and thin. We excel beyond our numbers because overcoming daunting odds has been bred into us from the very beginning, that is our pedigree.

Our resilience and our “aggressive mind,” as Twain described, nonetheless, causes us to stand out. We are here together, some physically, some gathered around a screen, carrying out both our learned and inherited behaviors. It is on this *Yom Tzom Kippur*, every year, that we come together to purify and renew ourselves. We place ourselves in a 25-hour bubble of purity and holiness. However, once the Shofar blows after Neilah, our challenges and our persistence resume.

And how intimidating is the Jewish future! In addition to all the normal struggles such as alcoholism, newly constructed family models, and political fracturing, wars across the globe, Coronavirus, Hurricanes with Greek letter names, mass media misinformation, (I could go on and on), we face the normalization of global anti-Semitism, and anti-Israel hatred. We should take some comfort that it seems to part of our makeup to overcome; we’ve done it before, and we’ll do it again.

During the Holocaust, the Jews resisting the Nazis had their own rally cry, a song in Yiddish called “*Zog Nisht Keynmol.*” As reports of a Jewish uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto reached the partisan fighter and Yiddish poet Hirsh Glik, he was moved to write the song which would soon spread to ghettos, camps and fighting groups in the forests, and it became the anthem of Jewish resistance, resilience and hope during the Holocaust. Its final words, *mir zaynen du* – we are here – signify the victory of the Jews and all humanity over the forces of hate and evil.

Mir Zaynen du – We are here. We survive. We thrive. Here at Brith Shalom, we have come together, time, and time again, – 3 floods in 3 years, culminating in the devastation of Harvey. Almost a year and half of COVID and its social and economic challenges. Yet *Mir Zaynen du*. As the joke about Jewish history goes: They tried to kill us, we survived, let’s eat.

Yet is also more – *Hineinu*. As I described on Rosh Hashanah, it is more than physical presence – *Hineinu* – implies a willingness to engage, to make a difference. Through each crisis– like family, we grow closer and take care of one another. Our persistence and our commitment to a Jewish future is both built-in and learned. We continue to pray, we continue to learn, we continue to gather. So,

I implore you to continue the tradition of Am K'shei Oref, of stubbornly linking our past to our future.

Find that pitzele gene within and consider joining our president, our leadership, our amazing benefactors, and our senior staff – in assuring the family of Brith Shalom a year of continued prayer, continued study, continued community, continued holiness. If you have already made your 5782 pledge, a heart-felt thank you! If you have not made a Yom Kippur pledge in the past, consider doing so this year. Shehechyanu! If you have done so, consider stretching a bissel more.

May we all say Mir Zaynin du and Hineinu – we are here, we are ready to engage to assure a continued and improved Jewish future. G'mar Chatimah Tovah.