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Erev Rosh Hashana 5779

I know a woman. Maybe you know her too. She is a good person. She is kind and thoughtful. She has a loving spouse, grown, successful children, and a couple of sweet grandkids. She's got a part time job, many hobbies she enjoys, and an active social life. She rises at the same time every day, exercises regularly, and she and her husband sit down for dinner every evening at 6pm. She goes to bed at 8:30pm each night, peaceful and serene. It's a perfect, idyllic life.

One day, however, this woman is not feeling so well. She's developed some aches and pains that just won't go away, and finally, after quite some time, she decides to go to see the doctor. After weeks of bloodwork, scans, biopsies and second opinions, she gets the diagnosis. She has cancer.

Each one of us, here in this room tonight has, or will at some point, be faced with a challenge you can't even begin to imagine. You'll be going about your daily life, minding your own business, when some seismic life event comes along and completely knocks you off your feet. I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but no one is immune to hardship. It *will* happen to you. Perhaps your house will be damaged by fire or water. Maybe you've lost your job. Or you've suffered from infertility. Perhaps your marriage has ended. You, or a loved one, is afflicted with a serious illness. A beloved family member passes away. Throughout these High Holydays our liturgy asks us, "Who shall live and who shall die? "Who will be tranquil and who will be troubled?" I don't wish these life traumas on anyone but, when tragedy strikes, and it will strike, the real question is: How will you respond?

On Rosh Hashana, we read about the struggles of our ancestors, focusing in on Abraham and the traumas he and his family endure. Sarah and Abraham are unable to conceive a child, and Hagar and her infant son, cast out by Sarah's jealousy, nearly die of thirst and starvation in the wilderness. Then, in the next chapter of the saga, we bear witness as Abraham takes his son, Isaac, up Mount Moriah and nearly sacrifices him at God's command. These Days of Awe,

beyond apples and honey, beyond family celebrations, force us to confront these stories of pain and suffering; those of our biblical ancestors, our own narratives, and the tales of those around us. And, as we encounter crises along the way, in these moments when our world seems to crumble around us, we must choose how to react.

After her diagnosis, the weight of her new title – cancer patient – crashes down upon her, and she retreats. She turns inward in confusion and fear because everything she thinks she knows has just been turned upside down. Anxiety takes over as she realizes that she and everyone she loves is neither invincible, nor immortal and, if this terrible thing can happen to her, what's to say something else horrible won't happen tomorrow, or next month, or next year? In her world where everything made sense, where everything was orderly and routine, this diagnosis is inconceivable. And she worries – if her response to this diagnosis is less than stoic and courageous, will she be perceived as weak, needy, and out of control? As she sinks deeper into the depths of her new reality, she feels damaged, diminished, broken beyond repair. She remains trapped in the darkness of her diagnosis for quite some time – fearing the future and mourning the perfect life she will never again regain.

Senator John McCain, who passed away last month at the age of 81, spent five years as a prisoner of war while serving as a Navy aviator in the Vietnam War. He was interrogated, tortured, and spent long stretches of time in solitary confinement. But even under these horrendous circumstances, he remained steadfast in his loyalty to his fellow captives and to the American people. When his famous name afforded him a chance to jump the line to go home early, he refused. When his cellmate's broken arm went untreated, McCain fashioned a cast out of his own bandages. Upon his return to the United States, McCain was lauded as a hero for his admirable conduct during his time as a prisoner of war. McCain's experience shaped the trajectory of his entire life, fueling him with a strength and determination that sustained him throughout the rest of his military career, and his time in the House and Senate. (Lily Rothman, Time, August 26, 2018).

Just before his death, a few weeks ago, Senator McCain offered these words to the American people:

*"I have often observed that I am the luckiest person on earth. I feel that way even now as I prepare for the end of my life. I have loved my life, all of it. I have had experiences, adventures and friendships enough for ten satisfying lives, and I am so thankful. Like most people, I have regrets. But I would not trade a day of my life, in good or bad times, for the best day of anyone else's."*

The woman finally realizes that, if she is to survive this, she must find a way out of the depths. In order to do so, she must first figure out who she is at the core of her being and then decide how to recreate her world in light of her cancer. Thus begins her transformative journey. She reaches out, finally sharing her diagnosis and course of treatment with friends and family. When she does, she is met with an outpouring of love and support. No one judges her, no one tries to minimize her suffering, nor take away her fear. Instead, they offer words of encouragement and reassure her that she is not alone.

Treatment is difficult and her doctors are not sure the prescribed course of chemo will eradicate the cancer. She has set backs; she breaks down, she is angry, frustrated, sick and tired. But she keeps moving forward, one foot in front of the other. With continued support, and time to think, a trace of hope begins to emerge. Once again, she is able to take pleasure in some of her day-to-day activities. She enjoys reading a book. Solving a crossword puzzle. The woman is surprised as she observes her own resiliency, her ability to adapt to this "new normal."

Enduring adversity and coming through the other side often reveals an inner strength we never knew was there. But how do we transcend the darkness of our suffering and emerge into the light of a more meaningful life?

We've all heard of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder – PTSD – the negative effects one suffers as a result of surviving a harrowing experience. But what about the flip-side – how do we explain the narratives of people like Senator McCain, a five-year prisoner of war, who went on to do

great things with his life and who, on his deathbed, announced he was the luckiest man who ever lived? This phenomenon – the ability to shape the negative events in our lives into something that provides an opportunity for growth and greater appreciation for life – this is Post Traumatic Growth.

In the mid-1990's, psychologists began to study survivors who exhibited growth after trauma and defined PTG as, "a positive change resulting from an individual's struggle with a major life crisis or traumatic event." (PTG Research Group at UNC at Charlotte). They observed that survivors of harrowing life episodes can not only heal from their experiences, but can actually grow into stronger, more driven, and more resilient people because of it. Posttraumatic growth is not simply about coping; it refers to positive changes that cut to the very core of our way of being in the world.

If we can shift our mental focus away from the destructive effects of a trauma in our lives, we can begin to understand that it is in the struggle with suffering that growth may arise. PTG does not mean freedom from the memories of what happened to us, the grief of our loss, or other forms of distress we may continue to feel, but with mindful intention, we can choose to live our lives more meaningfully in light of what has occurred.

*"Imagine one day you accidentally knock a treasured vase off its perch. It smashes into tiny pieces. What do you do? Do you try to put the vase back together as it was? Or do you pick up the beautiful colored pieces and use them to make something new – such as a colorful mosaic?" (Professor Stephen Joseph, *What Doesn't Kill Us – The New Psychology of Posttraumatic Growth*)*

When adversity arises, shattering the assumptions of everyday life, we must choose how to reassemble the pieces. If posttraumatic growth is to take place, we must become the driving force in the re-creation of our own lives. Those who try to put their lives back together exactly as they were remain fractured and vulnerable. But those who accept the breakage and build themselves anew become more resilient and open to new ways of living.

Business woman, Stacy Kramer, in her 2010 Ted Talk says:

*“Imagine, if you will – a gift. I’d like for you to picture it in your mind... it’s going to do incredible things for you. It will bring all of your family together. You will feel loved and appreciated like never before...It will recalibrate what’s most important in your life. It will redefine your sense of spirituality and faith. You’ll expand your vocabulary, meet new people, and you’ll have a healthier lifestyle...Your life will have new meaning. Peace, health, serenity, happiness, nirvana. The price? \$55,000, and that’s an incredible deal. By now I know you’re dying to know what it is and where you can get one. Does Amazon carry it? Does it have the Apple logo on it? Not likely. It was a rare gem – a brain tumor, hemangioblastoma – the gift that keeps on giving...I wouldn’t wish this gift for you...But I wouldn’t change my experience. It profoundly altered my life...”*

In truth, not every story of adversity ends like Kramer’s or McCain’s, nor is every trauma a gift. But human beings are remarkably adaptable and exquisitely resilient. We naturally strive to create meaning from our struggles and, with practice, we can learn to flourish in light of adversity. We can choose to emerge wiser and stronger on the other side. Viktor Frankl, the renowned Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist, wrote, “Between a stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lays our growth and our freedom. The last of human freedoms is to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances.”

We can learn to cultivate growth by first noticing the way we talk to ourselves. When we begin to understand the significance of our experience in ways that construct meaning, ways in which we see ourselves as survivors and even thrivers, ways that encourage hopefulness, we can begin to grow. Along the way, we can ask ourselves: Have my relationships with family and friends been strengthened and deepened? Has my perspective on life shifted, allowing me to explore new opportunities? Are there things I did to survive what happened that revealed inner strengths I didn’t know I possessed? Do I have a greater appreciation for life and how to live it? Am I more grateful for what I have and for those around me?

As the seeds of hope take root, notice and care for them. As growth blossoms, nurture it. Enact the changes you notice, even in small ways, one step at a time. With care and attention, your growth will flourish. (Stephen Joseph, Huff Post)

The woman – the cancer patient – she’s doing great. She and her husband are travelling the globe, and visiting often with friends and family. Her relationships have deepened and, in sharing her experience with others, she can now offer perspective and support to those who stand now where she once stood. She is grateful for each new day and has a greater appreciation for the fragility of life. Nevertheless, she fully understands that the word “cure” is a myth and that she will need to remain vigilant for the rest of her life. Cancer has ripped away the delusion that mortality is something she or any doctor can control. She is keenly aware that, if not cancer, something else will one day overtake her. And, while some might pity this new reality, she now stands stronger than ever, more open-hearted, joyful and flourishing, not in spite of, but ultimately because of, her battle with cancer.

All too often, it is only when faced with the bitterness of life’s challenges that we can savor the sweetness of the blessings of each day. Only when we lose someone we love, can we cherish each moment spent in close relationships with others. Only when we’ve looked death in the eye and lived to see another day, can we walk through this world truly aware of the miracles of each and every moment.

Some of you here tonight may be in the midst of your trauma – your head swirling with fear and uncertainty – and it may be too soon to even conceive of anything good coming from this experience. For others, perhaps you’re climbing up out of the depths, clinging to hope and searching for that glimmer of light in the darkness. Some of you may have just come through a difficult time and are working to put your life back together. And for others, your hardship is but a distant memory. Where ever you are on your path, in this season of awe and introspection, let the still small voice in your heart remain the same - from suffering and adversity we *can* grow. As Rumi says, “The wound is the place where the light can enter you.”

Yet growth cannot happen in isolation. Growth happens when we are surrounded by those who love and care for us. We need a support system and we need to feel that we are part of something larger than ourselves. We, the members of your Temple Sinai family, are here to

hold you when everything falls apart. We are your friends and your confidants – tell us your story – your struggles, your pain, your hardship. We'll walk with you in the darkness, holding your hand, lifting you up. We're your community – we'll be there by your side as you strive to create your life anew. We'll celebrate with you when you've come through the other side. And, when you're ready, we hope you'll use your new understanding to help others in our midst who are struggling. Together, through our rich traditions and our own life experiences, we can work to create meaning in a world that is so often scary and complicated. Out of struggle, we can emerge stronger than before, with a renewed sense of purpose and a deeper appreciation for life. And, because of our experiences, our hard-earned wisdom, and the strength of our community, we will be better equipped to deal with whatever challenges lie ahead. As we enter into this High Holyday season, may we aspire to always live a life of meaning. May we always reach towards resiliency and strength. May we yearn to find opportunities for growth in every experience. Shana Tova