

Resilience

Did you know that the city of Boston has a Chief of Resilience? You're probably wondering what this position is all about. When I first read about the newly appointed Chief of Resilience what came to mind was the slogan *Boston Strong* which – as I'm sure you remember, became the shorthand for talking about the incredible resilience that our city became known for after the Marathon bombing.

So why does Boston need a chief of Resilience? Well, the position was envisioned by the Rockefeller Foundation in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The Foundation has funded such positions in one hundred cities across the country. The interesting thing is that the Globe journalist who wrote about this newly appointed Chief questioned whether governments and foundations can actually *teach* and *implement* resilience. Our city's response after the Marathon notwithstanding, he argued that resilience is a quality that Americans lost years ago. According to him, our instinct today is to "scapegoat" – to find others to blame for our problems rather than taking responsibility and moving forward.

Is this a fair assessment? I don't know; but what I do know is that right here, on this holiest day of the year, *responsibility* takes center stage. Yom Kippur is all about reflecting on our shortcomings and figuring out how we might do better in the coming year. It's ironic, however, that the term "scapegoat" actually comes from the Yom Kippur ritual described in the Torah. For this we have William Tyndale to blame – a 16th century English translator of the Bible! He coined the term "scapegoat" and used it to designate the goat that – in this ancient ritual of atonement – escapes to Azazel.

At the core of Yom Kippur is what I would call "R and R" which isn't shorthand for *rest and relaxation* – but rather, *responsibility and resilience*. On the one hand our tradition urges us to look back and take *responsibility* for our wrongs. On the other hand, when we look forward and acknowledge the uncertainty that lies ahead, our tradition insists on our capacity for *resilience*.

As we reflect on what lies ahead we can't help but wonder what this coming year will bring. We know that circumstances can change in a matter of seconds. This uncertainty that is built into our lives is poignantly captured by the novelist Joan Didion who begins her book, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, with these lines: "Life changes in an instant. You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends." She is referring to the evening when her husband suddenly had a heart attack and died.

We express this uncertainty throughout the High Holy Days but especially when we chant the *Unetane tokef* and say words like "who by fire and who by water" – recognizing that there are forces beyond our control – forces like Hurricane Matthew, that can wreak havoc with our lives. But then comes the refrain, our *prescription*, as it were, for resilience, for how we bounce back.

It's a prescription with three distinct ingredients. You know the line: *u'tshuva, u'tefilah, u'tzedakah ma'avirin et roah hagezeirah*. Repentance, prayer and acts of loving-kindness mitigate the severity of the decree. These three ingredients are our tradition's response to the hardships that come our way.

I say "the hardships that come our way" rather than "the decree" because does God actually decree from on high that *this* person will succumb to cancer and this *other* person will live? Insurance companies and airlines might tell us that certain unexpected events are "acts of God" – like when my basement flooded a few years ago or when I missed my connecting flight due to bad weather. However, our tradition teaches that God does not send us storms – or cancer, for that matter. But rather, that God is found in the courage and determination that we are able to bring forth to rebuild our lives *despite* these events.

So let us return to the prescription for resilience, which begins with *teshuva* – the ability to change course, to come back to center, to reconcile. *Teshuva* is about mending relationships and re-aligning priorities. Doing *teshuva* won't prevent a diagnosis of cancer but hopefully, it will bring a sense of peace and well-being and make us that much stronger, that much better equipped to do battle with the hardships that come our way.

The second ingredient – *tefillah*, or prayer, is about opening ourselves up to awe and gratitude – and letting the world take our breath away! And since key prayers are said only in the context of a minyan, *tefillah* is also about community. I am reminded of

the old Jewish joke that points to this interconnection between prayer and community. You know the one about Yossi, a pious Jew who is “a regular” at synagogue and his friend who also attends synagogue on a regular basis despite being an agnostic. One day, a congregant asks this friend what motivates him – an agnostic – to come to services, to which he responds: “Yossi comes to talk to God and I – well, I come to talk to Yossi!” This is certainly one way that prayer and community come together.

Now, the third ingredient – *tzedakah* or righteousness, is about pursuing justice and acting from a fountain of generosity. In his recently published book entitled *Nine Things That I've Learned About Life*, Rabbi Harold Kushner includes *tzedakah* as one of these nine lessons. He offers countless examples of congregants who came to him feeling deeply alone – feeling like their lives weren't worth living any more. He would tell his congregants – as he now tells his readers: “Helping someone else is empowering; doing for others makes us feel strong and competent.” The lesson he learned is that when people find someone to help – when they reach out to others, they feel a lot better about themselves.

For many of us, the person who epitomizes resilience, who taught by example how one moves forward after enduring terrible suffering is Elie Wiesel. His life's work was, at its core, all about *tzedakah* – all about speaking out against prejudice and hatred so that others would be spared the suffering he endured. In the process of pursuing this lofty goal, he showed us how to turn suffering into hope and love.

Elie Wiesel credits our ancestor, Isaac – who he calls “the first survivor” with teaching *him* how to do this. Years ago, Wiesel wrote a moving essay urging us to learn from Isaac's ability to turn unspeakable suffering into love and ultimately, into laughter. In his essay he notes that the name *Yitzchak* – comes from the root “to laugh.” Laughter was Sarah's response when she learned she would have a son in her old age. And years later - when Abraham almost sacrifices Isaac, what is Isaac's response? Despite the trauma of being bound by his father, Isaac marries and has children, refusing to let this experience turn him into a bitter man. If we are able to do this, says Wiesel – to turn away from bitterness, to open our hearts, we will discover people who will support us and a God who will give us the inner strength to overcome and ultimately, to laugh.

This past summer I read many beautiful eulogies and articles about Wiesel but one in particular caught my attention because it reminded me of Wiesel's attraction to

Isaac. It read: “Mr. Wiesel was liberated from the Buchenwald camp as a 16- year old but at his funeral he was remembered for a legacy little known by those outside his immediate circle: he loved to laugh.” Ted Koppel, a close friend, spoke about how funny Mr. Wiesel was, and of their decades-long friendship spent finding ways to make each other laugh. To move from suffering to laughter – to bring healing to the world – to the survivors and their families, and to those who endured prejudice and hatred, was Wiesel’s extraordinary legacy.

But there are others, whose life stories aren’t nearly as well known, who can also teach us about courage and resilience. Like the young swimmer from Syria, Yusra Mardini, who represented a team of ten refugee Olympic athletes this summer in Rio. Mardini didn’t win any medals but she won the hearts of many. Just one year ago Mardini and her sister were fleeing Syria along with eighteen others when their dinghy began sinking in the Aegean Sea as they crossed over to Greece. The motor had failed. Nobody on the boat could swim except the sisters. It’s a story that often ends in tragedy, but not this time. The two women leaped out of the boat, into cold waters and pushed the boat three hours in open water to prevent it from capsizing – eventually making it to land and saving the lives of the eighteen people in the boat.

I think about Mardini’s strength and resilience and wonder – how can we give our children the resources to face adversity? Hopefully, they’ll never have to face that degree of hardship. But it’s a fascinating coincidence of sorts that the Talmud lists swimming as one of the four obligations incumbent upon parents. One can understand how this duty was essential in the past. At a time when water transportation means were widely used and represented a great danger, knowing how to swim could mean the difference between survival and drowning. However, I think the rabbis also meant for us to read this obligation metaphorically. Learning how to stay afloat in what, at times, might be dangerous and difficult conditions, is what life is all about. And therefore, teaching our children to swim is about giving them the skills to survive – independent of our help, when the waters get rough.

This, in fact, is the gist of Dr. Wendy Mogel’s book – *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee*, which made quite a “splash” since it first came out fifteen years ago. The sub-title of this best seller is: *Using Jewish Teachings to Raise Self-Reliant Children*. Dr. Mogel urges us to manage expectations – to teach our children that while “life is good” – as the famous t-shirt reads, we don’t always get what we want. And she tells us that allowing our children to actually experience the “bumps” along the way is what nurtures

resilience. As a parent I know how difficult this is; how desperately we want to protect our children from hardship. But Dr. Mogel encourages us not to over-protect them so that our children can experience the capacity they have within to bounce back from adversity.

The world we live in remains far from predictable. My hope is that we embrace the coming year trusting in our capacity to take *responsibility* for our shortfalls and in our ability to change course; trusting in our capacity to face what comes our way, knowing that the ingredients for *resilience* – *teshuva, tefillah and tzedakah*, have been given to each and every one of us.

May we have a healthy, peaceful and fulfilling year!