

Resilience is Not New

(RH Day 1)

As a child, I always wondered what it would be like to live through history. I read books full of characters living heroic lives in times of great change, and naively sought a taste of that excitement for myself. I heard stories of my grandmother's childhood heroics during the Great Depression, and my ancestors' epic journeys to America, and wondered if I would be brave and strong enough to meet such challenges. My imagination ran wild, but I never saw the time I was living through as particularly historic.

I thought I finally had my moment at the end of 1999, when everyone was preparing for the new millennium. Computers would crash! Utilities would fail! The world would start anew from zero! I had to be there to see it. I begged my parents to let me stay up until midnight so that I could count down and see the ball drop in Times Square. When the clock struck, I was devastated to discover that the ball did not, in fact, "drop" and shatter in a dazzling display, it just sort of slid down a pole. All the computers and utilities were fine. There was nothing exceptional about January 1st, except that I was very sleepy.

One year later this country experienced another historic moment, this time a tragedy, when the planes crashed into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and Somerset PA on September 11th. On that Tuesday morning, 2,977 innocent lives were lost. In the aftermath, President Bush created the Department of Homeland Security, our country was thrust into a war that would last more than a decade, and the face of foreign policy would change forever. But I was a child who only vaguely understood the significance of this attack. All I really knew was there were longer lines at the airport when I went to visit my grandparents.

A few years later, in November of 2008, I was a senior in High School with a slightly more sophisticated understanding of the world. I was thrilled to cast my first ballot for the first Black president of the United States. Certainly, those minutes in the voting booth were a brush with history. But that afternoon I went back to school and things stayed pretty much the same in my small corner of the world.

All of these moments **were** historic, but the monumental changes that came with them arrived so slowly that I didn't really perceive them at the time. That's often how history works. Change occurs in such small, slow, increments, that we don't often notice until they've passed.

Except sometimes, change hits us all at once. Anyone alive in 1963 knows where they were when President Kennedy was shot. Especially in Framingham, Christa McAuliffe's hometown, we remember when we saw or heard about the explosion on the Challenger. And now we are living through another one of those historical moments, a moment that rushed upon us with such terrifyingly tremendous change that we have known we are making history even as we live through it. This crisis has been particularly frightening for many reasons. It came upon us suddenly, leading to the abrupt closure of schools, stores, our synagogue, and many other important places. It has lasted much more than a moment, forcing us to adapt almost every aspect of our daily lives. And we still don't know when it will truly be over or what awaits us on the other side. Economic, medical, and social science experts speculate that even after our quarantine is completely lifted, the "normal" we return to will look very different from what we called "normal" before.

We wonder what this will mean for our jobs and education, for our families, for our favorite places, and for our Jewish communities. Even before the COVID crisis, we were adapting to meet the needs of the next generations who are engaging with Jewish life in different ways. Many of

our new approaches, developed during this crisis, may become mainstays of Jewish community engagement going forward. We simply don't know.

Fortunately, unprecedented moments in history are not, in fact, unprecedented for Jews or Judaism! Our ancestors faced and overcame many crises from ancient times up until today, and we will draw strength and wisdom from their experiences.

In the earliest days of our existence, Pharaoh tried to wipe out our people by enslaving us and murdering our children. When Pharaoh decreed death for all Jewish baby boys, the men gave up on relations with their wives. They didn't want to have children only to see them killed. But the women would not surrender. There are elaborate midrashim, rabbinic stories, about the women seducing their husbands, giving birth in the wilderness, and going to great lengths to hide and provide for their children to ensure the continuity of our people even though they did not know if we would ever be free. When the Jews finally left Egypt, the Torah tells us that God sent Moses to save us based on the merit of these women who persevered in the face of profound uncertainty.

Their strength inspired many generations through the wilderness and the conquest of Ancient Israel all the way up until the time of the greatest

kings and the Temple in Jerusalem. After the Jews finally reached the Promised Land and settled the city of Jerusalem, King Solomon built an elaborate home for God that would serve as the center of communal life for almost 500 years. But in the year 587 our people's resilience was tested once again when the Babylonians destroyed our spiritual home. We were in exile for only a short while before the Babylonians allowed us to return to Israel and rebuild the Temple in 521. This Second Temple was smaller, not as grand, but it stood for almost 600 years before being destroyed once again, this time by invading Romans. This time, we knew it would not be rebuilt.

The Temple in Jerusalem had been the center of our religion for a combined 1100 years. Even before it was built, our entire liturgy revolved around aspirations to the day we could offer our sacrifices at the Temple. While it stood, our ritual calendar was centered on pilgrimage to the holy site and when the Temple fell, the rabbis of the Talmud knew they were on the verge of losing not just this holy place, but the entire religion and all its people. They very cleverly pivoted to a new system of worship and ritual observance, based on daily prayer and holiday observance at home. But

they had to connect these new rituals to our ancient tradition, and convince people of the authenticity of the new way.

In Brachot 26b, they lay out their new plan for daily prayer based on the same schedule as the daily sacrifices offered in the Temple. Jews would pray at shacharit, mincha, and ma'ariv, morning, afternoon, and evening, because those were the times when the priests offered sacrifices in the Temple. But, the rabbis are quick to note that the schedule of sacrifices was **actually** much older than the Temple itself. They noted how our Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob established these ritual moments throughout the day when they by quoting three descriptions of their conversations with God:

Abraham instituted the morning prayer when “he rose early in the morning and went to the place he stood with God.”¹

Isaac established the afternoon prayer when “he went out to converse with God in the field before evening.”²

Jacob instituted the evening prayer when “he encountered this holy place and slept there, for the sun had set.”³

¹ Gen 19:27

² Gen 24:63

³ Gen 28:11

Quoting this practice, the rabbis connected their new ritual system not just to the Temple, but to the generations before the Temple, cleverly demonstrating how much transition the religion has already undergone and survived.

They teach a similar message in Mishnah Ta'anit 4:6. The rabbis explain the reason for the fast on the 17th day of Tammuz, when we refrain from eating, is to commemorate the day on which the Romans breached the walls of the city of Jerusalem. But, they remind us that the 17th of Tammuz is also the anniversary of the day when Moses came down the mountain, saw the Golden Calf, and smashed the tablets of the Ten Commandments! Three weeks after the 17th of Tammuz we fast again on the 9th of Av, to remember the day the Romans captured and destroyed the Temple. ON this occasion the rabbis remind us that it is also the anniversary of the incident with the 12 spies who bring a bad report about the Promised Land, thus dooming their entire generation to die in the desert.

See what they did there? In both instances, the rabbis created an opportunity to remember and mourn, **while also reminding us that we have survived tragedies before.** Our ancestors survived the shattering of the tablets, they say, and we will survive the fall of Jerusalem. The Dor

HaMidbar, the generation who wandered in the desert, did not get to enter into Israel. But we, their descendants, have flourished. And even though we might not see the rebuilding of the Temple, future generations will see the end of Roman oppression.

These rabbis knew that resilience requires us to take advantage of the opportunities we have in each moment, and they seized their chance to introduce a new way of connecting with God. They recognized that resilience requires us to focus our hope on long-term goals, and they set their sights on keeping Jews connected to the ebb and flow of seasons, holidays, and liturgy even if they couldn't celebrate at the Temple in Jerusalem. The wisdom the rabbis of the Talmud used to carry first-century Jews through the devastation of destruction has carried generations of Jews through many crises.

In each generation we have overcome whatever crisis we face by balancing adaptation and tradition. We have drawn upon our tradition's ancient wisdom as we endured many monumental tragedies, including exile from Spain and the Shoah. Jews displaced from Spain retained their Sephardic music, language, customs, and identity, even if they haven't lived in Sepharad for generations! We have developed an entire theological genre

to respond to the reality of post-Holocaust Jewry, and Ashkenazi Jews continue to connect with the traditions of places they've never even visited. This is how we respond to crisis and change. We bring our beloved customs to new locations and new circumstances, ensuring our survival while maintaining connections to the places we lived and loved and over our long history this mode of adapting to new things has become a tradition unto itself.

I learn a lot from the crises of these previous generations. First, I learn that we will not just survive, we will thrive. Anyone could have reasonably predicted that the exile from Jerusalem, the Expulsion from Spain, or the Shoah were the end of the Jewish people. And yet here we are as a community, still, today. I also learn that we will need to adapt, and that adaptation is an embrace of our tradition, not a break from it. I never expected to be delivering a Rosh Hashanah sermon online, but this year this was the way to bring our tradition to all of us in our current circumstances, and I am so incredibly proud of the way the Temple Beth Sholom community has embraced the project of virtual High Holy Days. I hope we return to some boring, historically insignificant days soon. Even as I anxiously await the resolution of this crisis, I also know that we can make

this moment in history about not just despair and loss, but also about hope and triumph. I know this because we have done it before.