

Who Shall Be Tranquil and Who Shall Be Troubled: Cultivating Resilience
Rabbi Rosalin Mandelberg, Ohef Sholom Temple
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A joke: A man came to see the rabbi in deep despair. For fifteen years he had been pouring himself heart and soul into his business. He had struggled to get it off the ground, investing his family's money to try to make it fly. But it had never really taken off, and now it was actually crashing. Debts were piling up, he was consumed with worry, he couldn't eat and couldn't sleep, his family was in danger of falling apart. He didn't know what to do. Finally, as a last resort, he decided to see if the rabbi had any advice for him. He told the rabbi all of his troubles and then asked, "Rabbi, can you help me?"

The rabbi replied, "Try this. Get a beach chair and a Bible, pack them in your car, and drive down to the oceanfront. Bring the chair and the Bible down to the edge of the water. Sit in the chair, place the Bible in your lap, and open it up so that the wind can blow its pages. Then close your eyes, and start to think about your life. Consider all of your challenges and all of your blessings. Think it all through. When you are ready, open your eyes and look at the Bible. Read the first words your eyes fall on, and they will tell you what to do." The man thanked the rabbi for his time, shook his hand, and left.

Three months later the man returned to see the rabbi. He drove up to the synagogue in the Rolls Royce he had just bought. He was dressed in a brand new custom-made suit. He walked into the rabbi's office and handed him a six-figure check, saying that he wanted to donate it to the Temple to thank the rabbi for his wonderful advice. The rabbi was delighted, and asked the man what had happened after their last meeting.

"Well, Rabbi," the man answered. "I did exactly what you said. I packed up my chair and Bible and went to the shore. I sat there for a good long time with my eyes closed, really thinking about my life and sorting out my issues. And then I opened my eyes, read the words of the Bible, and did what they said, and since then my life has never been better."

"That's terrific!" exclaimed the rabbi. "But tell me. What were the words you saw in the Bible that gave you such helpful guidance?"

The man replied, "Chapter 11."

All kidding aside, I wish it were as easy to solve all of our problems as asking the rabbi for advice, opening up a Bible, or allowing the winds of chance to determine our fate. While I hope all of these can help, especially the rabbi, our tradition, and faith, most of what determines our ability to get through the tough times, has more to do with ourselves, and what we call today, "resilience," than anything else. Defined by psychologists as "that ineffable quality that allows some people to be knocked down by life and come back stronger than ever," resilience is that something that most of us have buried deep within us that allows us to find a way to rise from the ashes, rather than letting failure overcome us and drain our resolve. Even after misfortune . . . resilient people are able to change course and soldier on. But resilience isn't about just rebounding from defeat; it has to do with how well we stand up to the wear and tear of daily life, the many obstacles, frustrations, setbacks, and disappointments that are a normal part of human existence.¹

I know, thankfully, on this eve of *Rosh Hashana*, most of us are hopeful that the New Year will bring happiness, health, fulfillment, and blessings for us and those we love. But many of us also sit here this night, a little uncomfortable. In thinking about how things are different this year and last, we may be feeling our age more acutely; how we cannot do so many of the things we used to do so easily; how our body has weakened, our joints ache, and our pace has slowed; how, far too often, all I we want to do is close the door of our room and hide alone inside. Or our mother or father are getting older and frailer, more forgetful, and more dependent; and we are worried for them and for what it will mean for us, to care for them or, God forbid, to lose them. Or we are at a place in our lives where we should be fulfilled in our work and enjoying real intimacy with our partner, but, instead, we feel ourselves cruising through life on autopilot, barely feeling anything, least of all experiencing real joy. Or our child or grandchild should be an adult, gainfully employed, independent, building a bright future, but he or she is floundering and stuck, even lost; and we just don't know what to do for them, how to help, or how to let go.

I could go on and on with examples of the adversity we all face some time in our lives. It is no wonder that the words of this High Holidays' dreadful *Une Tane Tokef* prayer, "Who shall live and who shall die? Who will be secure and who will be driven? Who shall be tranquil and who shall be troubled?" haunt us. Indeed, how to answer the question, "Who shall be tranquil and who shall be troubled," is the reason we return to this place, at this time and season, year after year. We want to figure out how we can find the inner-strength to deal successfully, day after day, with the challenges and demands, the stresses and pressure, of life; how we can bounce back from disappointments, adversity, and trauma; how we can be at peace with ourselves, with our loved ones, and with God. For above all, we desire to be tranquil, at peace, to live lives of meaning, of fulfillment, and of real connection, and love. In today's parlance, we yearn to know how to cultivate resilience so that our lives can be better because we are better at living life.

I could relate myriad biblical and historical accounts of how our people has managed to do this on a grand scale, surviving thousands of years of the efforts of others to destroy us. Or I could list many, many ways in which experts, from psychologists to coaches and from religious traditions to spiritual practices, attempt to advise us what to do in order to cultivate resilience. But instead, I'd like to share three short, true stories, through which we might learn to live more fully and peacefully during the New Year.

The first story. This past April, my beloved Aunt, Esther Alcalay, passed away in Los Angeles at the age of 69. Esti was a beautiful woman, inside and out. Not only did she pride herself on daily exercise, her tennis game, and Greek and Armenian folk dancing, but also, she was a gifted painter and a wonderful friend. Most of all, though, she was deeply devoted to her family -- a steadfast wife of 45 years; a loving *Ima*, mother, who dedicated herself to her two daughters, her beautiful "flowers," she'd say of them; an ever-present sister and aunt, who was always there to accept us, to listen, comfort, and inspire; and in her later years, a doting grandmother to the three grandchildren she simply called, "precious."

My aunt's life, like all of ours, was filled with ups and downs, primarily financial hard times, but no matter what was going on, when I asked, "how are you," she'd answer with her remarkable equanimity, that amazing combination of perspective and optimism, "Could be better, could be worse."

Even after she was diagnosed with Acute Myeloid Leukemia five and a half years ago, although she was frustrated and frightened, she was also determined that she would be among the 40% who make it to five years. So the bone marrow transplant was arranged, with a donor from Eastern Europe who was a perfect match, and the surgery was successful; within a short time she was leukemia free.

But that was only the beginning of the story. Despite all of the anti-rejection medicine she was taking, what ensued were five punishing years of graft versus host complications. The first to be attacked were her eyes, from which she could not only not see, but also which felt like they were filled with grains of sand all of the time. Then came her mouth and throat, which filled with painful sores and blisters and made eating, let alone drinking near impossible. She lost tremendous amounts of weight, a once 5'7", 120 lb beauty, now shriveled to less than 90 pounds. And finally, it attacked her lungs, progressively making breathing impossible without the aid of an oxygen tank 24/7. It was an awful existence. The last two years, she was nearly sequestered in her apartment, where even walking around the block required heroic effort.

But through it all, she never complained. She would not allow herself to be a burden to anyone. She was grateful when anyone called, visited, or helped her out in any way. She'd say, "thank you, Baby. I love you, Baby," whenever I or anyone else reached out. In fact, she rarely talked about herself at all, wanting only to know how we were doing and listening intently as we shared the goings on, and sometimes-petty complaints, in our lives. She lived those last two years for her children and grandchildren, wanting to help her girls in any way she could, even if it was just to offer advice when they asked and, more than anything, longing to watch her little grandchildren play, smile, laugh, talk, walk, grow, re-discovering the wonders of the world through their little eyes as we so often do. Even at the end, when she determined that she could not go into the hospital one more time for even one more treatment, she never stopped being that *Ima*, confiding in me that she hoped she wasn't disappointing anyone with her decision.

What was remarkable about my aunt Esther was not her ambition or a list of accomplishments, but her spirit. She possessed several of those qualities essential to resilience:² perspective, the ability to view and accept life as it is; optimism, having faith that things will work out for the best; and, most of all, gratitude, being grateful for all of your blessings. Realistic expectations, a positive attitude, thankfulness, and hope, a recipe for overcoming adversity and finding peace.

The second story. While I don't have much free time, or the ability to concentrate on reading books, this summer, I gave myself the gift of enjoying the creative non-fiction work of Daniel James Brown entitled, *The Boys in the Boat: Nine Americans and their Epic Quest for Gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics*. Primarily, the story centers around Joe Rantz, born in 1914 in Spokane, Washington, whose early years were fraught with poverty, illness and death; repeated abandonments

by his family; and back-breaking work in railway, timber and mining jobs for meager food and shelter, and his very survival. To say that he faced adversity in his life, -- that he knew fear, hurt, low self-esteem, and self-doubt, -- is a gross understatement; yet, somehow, early on, Joe had a realization that he would survive. With fierce determination and independence, he resolved that he would prove that he could make it on his own.

The rest of Joe's life was not without challenge and struggle, but, somehow, he managed to get into the University of Washington and to make it on to their highly competitive crew team, along with a group of other boys from the Pacific Northwest, all of whom had been beaten down by life and few of whom had ever rowed before. Together, they endured torturous physical, emotional, and mental workouts and competitions that stretched them beyond our comprehension. There were triumphant wins and devastating losses; and, ultimately, the most unlikely and greatest victory of all, that of the Gold Medal in the 1936 Berlin Olympics, where they defeated the favored German rowing team under the stunned gaze of Adolph Hitler.

Brown wrote: "What they learned was that the seeds of redemption lay not just in perseverance, hard work, and rugged individualism, but also in something more fundamental. If there was little they could do to turn a situation around individually, there was definitely something they could do collectively. Success lay not only in the self, but in the simple notion of everyone pitching in and pulling together. There, in their shared challenges and humility, lay their hope. By the time they arrived in Berlin they represented something much larger than themselves, a shared set of values, liberty most fundamental of them all. But the things that held them together -- trust in each other, mutual respect, humility, fair play, watching out for one another -- those were part of what America meant to them and those were the things they took with them into the water at Grunau" (p.123).

Joe and his fellow boys in the boat possessed, in large measure, several qualities critical to resilience: conscientiousness, an ethic of hard work and integrity; grit, self-discipline wedded to the dogged pursuit of a goal; and perseverance, the determination never to give up. But they also were willing to rely on others, a family of their own making, to help them through. We can never minimize the strength that comes from sharing our struggles and our strivings with others. Unlike Joe Rantz, most of us are fortunate enough to have loved ones in our corner, to whom we can turn and upon whom we can rely for help.

Live conscientiously. Practice grit. Persevere. But possess the self-awareness, humility, and willingness to admit that you don't have to do it alone. Like the boys in the boat, trust in others, respect their guidance, allow them to watch out for you. Resilience can come from within, an inborn trait, a matter of temperament; but it can also be nurtured and learned from others.

The third and final true story. On August 7th, just over a month ago, five teens from Virginia, were driving to Austin, Texas for a Japanese animation gathering called Anime Overload 2015. Among the passengers in the small SUV was one of our own, TK's, Temple Kids, Hannah Galbraith, who became a *Bat Mitzvah* and was Confirmed on this very *bema*; who served as an aid, a *Madricha*,

in our Religious School; and who was also active in OSTY, our Ohef Sholom Temple Youth Group, and its North American parent organization, NFTY. Hannah's parents, Lori and Scott, are active at OST as well both having served as presidents of Sisterhood and Men's Club, on our Board of Directors, and Lori even completed a term on our Executive Committee.

As many of you know, in a moment, life changed for the Galbraith family. That Friday, August 7th, at 2 a.m., an older gentleman entered the interstate on an off-ramp and proceeded to hit the SUV head on. An 18-wheeler, coming up behind them, watching the tragedy unfold before him, could not stop in time and rear-ended the five college sophomores to be. We cannot imagine the impact that those two blows had on the occupants of the car, but miraculously one survived with only broken bones, Kevin Diccico, and was able to drag Hannah, unconscious, from the car. He tried to save the others as well, but the car burst into flames, unimaginably ending the lives of their three dear friends instantly. Both Hannah and Kevin were airlifted to one of the best Trauma Hospitals in the country, Parkland Memorial in Dallas, and, in truth, this is when the story really begins.

For over two weeks, the Galbraith and Klinghoffer families sat vigil at the hospital waiting for a sign from Hannah that she would return to them. There were a thousand ups and downs each day, with many tears and come to Moses talks with God. In those early days, everyone's hope was hanging by a thread.

Here at Ohef Sholom, beside ourselves and wanting to do anything we could to help, we, the Galbraith's Temple Family, kicked into high gear. Congregants, some friends and some not, Sisterhood, Men's Club, OSTY, and our Caring Committee, organized for their short and long term needs. A "Go Fund Me Page" was set up by one of Hannah's Temple friends to help defray the costs of travel, accommodations, and food as the result of missed work. We started a prayer group that Friday night at Shabbat services, distributing all of the Psalms for healing and asking each person who was willing to take one and recite their psalm at least once daily, an ancient tradition that allowed the many, many people who so wanted to do something, to do their part. Additionally, I contacted a dear colleague in the Dallas area who not only visited himself, but also sent people from his Temple Emanu-El of Dallas Caring Congregation Committee, who brought copious amounts of food and sat with the family in the hospital as both comforters and new friends.

As painful as the waiting was, the Galbraith family said over and over again how overwhelmed they were by the outpouring of love and support they received. And slowly but surely, our prayers were answered and Hannah began to come back to us. With steady, baby steps, she became more alert, tried to communicate via signals, and smiled. Days later, she could wheel herself around the hallways in a wheel chair. Then came the first utterance of "Good Morning" and "I love you." A few days after that, she was able to brush her teeth, to walk with assistance outside in the sunshine, and finally to eat a sandwich. She has since transferred to a rehab facility in Richmond and has been, for the past two weeks, in a rigorous program of speech, occupational, and physical therapy as well as therapeutic recreation. She still has a long way to go, but Hannah and her family, resilient as they are on their own and wholly unaccustomed to asking for help from others, are strengthened immeasurably by their own family of grandparents, aunts and uncles and cousins,

but also, they are embraced by an extended congregational family who they know love and care about them.

I shared on face book about Cantor Wally and my recent visit:

"We celebrated Hannah's birthday today by singing *Yom Huledet Sameach* (Happy Birthday) and *Mishebeirach* (the prayer for healing) and Hannah remembered every word and sang along with us. There were so many happy tears and I love you's and hugs and kisses exchanged. It was a rare and precious, even miraculous, day none of us will ever forget. A minute at a time, step by step, Hannah is coming home. Keep praying! We love you Hannah!!!"

In addition to your inner-strength and the love of your family, resilience can also come from the compassion, care, and prayers of your community; from your Temple family who shares with you on your journey and can provide you with sustenance and hope even when you cannot find it in yourself. As a post script, this coming Tuesday, the day after tomorrow Hannah, literally and physically, will move back to her family home in Cheasapeake.

There is yet another way that coming together to Temple, in whatever capacity, can help us to be resilient. Most of you only experience it on these High Holidays a few days a year, but others know its blessings the other 361 days as well. In the midst of our busy lives and world, we can enter into this building, or this sanctuary, slip back into our spiritual lives, and know that with all of our anxiety about our unknown future; with our fears that we are not significant enough for anyone to care about or to listen to; with our angst and hopes mingled, we can always turn to God. The power of those moments, indeed of *Rosh Hashanah*, is knowing that the Master of the Universe is concerned with us and cares for each of us. While all of us are on a mortal journey to the grave; while we live, God takes notice and even delights in us and, most of all, we are assured that we not alone.³

Three stories about resilience that model for us how to live fully and peacefully, and how to help others to do the same, with our challenges, but also with resilience. Like my Aunt Esther, may perspective, optimism, and gratitude, be your guiding principles. Like Joe Rantz, may you find the inner-strength that enables you to persevere, to live conscientiously and with grit, but also to trust in others to help you. And like our Hannah and her family, may you be open to the caring and concern of your Temple Family, relying upon your faith and community, and believing in God's care for you, to bring you to healing and wholeness. In this New Year 5776, may you be among those who are tranquil even when you are troubled. Amen.

ENDNOTES

¹ Rabbi Janet Marder, *A New Game Every Day*, *Betham.org*, October 31, 2014.

² All of the qualities necessary for resilience, mentioned in this sermon, come from *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character* by Paul Tough (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), 2012. Secondly, I also consulted *Raising Resilient Children: Fostering Strength, Hope, and Optimism in Your Child*, by Robert Brooks PH.D. and Sam Goldstein, PH.D. (New York: McGraw-Hill), 2001.

³ Rabbi Jonathan Miller, *Fine and Not Fine*, *Rosh Hashanah Sermon*, Temple Emanu-El, Birmingham, Alabama, 5774/2013.