

## **Finding Resilience**

I'd like to share two stories with you.

Abraham Lincoln was born into poverty. His mother died when he was just a boy. As a young man, he lost one of his first jobs. Not long afterwards he was defeated in his run to be on the Illinois State Legislature. A year later, he failed in business again. Two years after that, his sweetheart died. The following year, at the age of 27, Lincoln had a nervous breakdown. A couple years after that he was defeated in another political race. In the next several years: Lincoln was defeated in his nomination for Congress; he lost his renomination after being elected to Congress two years earlier; and he was rejected four more times in various political races before finally being elected our country's 16th president.

Now a more contemporary story. On May 1, 2015, Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg and her husband, Dave Goldberg, then CEO of SurveyMonkey, were enjoying a vacation in Mexico. Their lives looked perfect with two healthy young children and every opportunity at their fingertips. Then, one night, Dave went to run on the treadmill at the resort and all of a sudden, his heart stopped and he dropped dead from a cardiac arrhythmia. Sandberg found her husband lifeless on the ground. She flew back to California to tell her two children that they would never see their father again.

The grief nearly crushed her. Some of you may have read her Facebook post that went viral not long after she observed the period of *shloshim* following Dave's burial. Sandberg was not sure if she would ever be able to recover from such a traumatic event. But she did and is now an inspiration and champion for those who rebound from life-altering events.

My friends, these two stories are not necessarily unique, other than the famous people they are about. You see, these stories are about a natural human condition. A condition that we are all able to call on when needed. They are about the power of resilience.

In the first story, Lincoln keeps persevering after every setback. When many of us might have chosen a different career path, Lincoln kept dusting himself off and trying again. He was passionate about serving the American people and his resilience allowed him to focus, not on all of his failures, but rather on the many opportunities that he saw before him.

In the second story, Sheryl Sandberg came face-to-face with a nightmare I hope none of us ever experience, though I know some of us have. When so many people in her situation have fallen in an endless pit of depression, Sandberg, with the help of close friends and her Jewish community, was able to slow her descent and then reverse course. She writes, “And so began the rest of my life. It was—and still is—a life I never would have chosen, a life I was completely unprepared for.”<sup>1</sup> Such is the reality when life throws us a curveball, or better yet, a beanball.

All of us have experienced challenging times. Perhaps your neighbors right now are going through something at this very instant. And I doubt that any of us will be immune from them in the future. No person on earth goes through life without a hardship. For many of us, they come as a surprise. Some are foreseeable, but like a storm, are completely unstoppable. The question is: when misfortune and trauma arrive, what can we do about it? How do we move forward in life?

In her book *Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy*, co-written with psychologist and Wharton professor, Adam Grant, Sheryl Sandberg beautifully shares her story and the stories of many others who, after faced with tragedy, have coped with their losses and adapted to their new lives. Sandberg and Grant’s thesis is this: “Our amount of resilience isn’t fixed... Resilience is the strength and speed of our responses to adversity—and we can build it.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sandberg, Sheryl, and Adam M. Grant. *Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy*. Knopf, 2017. p. 6

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 10

Imagine that. Throughout our lives we will deal with many setbacks and tribulations, such as failing ourselves and those who depend on us, losing our jobs, losing a loved one, receiving a dire prognosis. And our reaction to these events can be honed to the point that will allow us to recover and ultimately thrive. Our resilience is a trait that can be worked on like a muscle. The more attention we give it now will help us when we face adversity down the road.

As you know from previous sermons, I enjoy looking to the medical and scientific communities for support and evidence. And I will share what I've learned on this topic. But, perhaps more importantly is what our tradition teaches us about building resilience.

As Jews, we have certainly had our setbacks throughout all of history. One could argue that no other group has suffered more for as long of a time. But, we are still here and thriving. How have we been able to rebound so often?

Let's first look at Adam and Eve. The first humans in our narrative made decisions that forever changed their lives and ours. As a result, they got kicked out of the Garden of Eden. Men were destined to work by the sweat of their brow and women were condemned to suffer during childbirth. What did they do? They began all over again. They showed resilience by having children and living their new lives.

Tragedy struck them once more. One of their sons, Cain, murdered their other son, Abel. They persevered and even had another child.

Last week we read about the Akeidah, the near sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham. According to one midrash, Sarah died from the sadness and pain of what just took place. She was unable to find her resilience. Abraham, on the other hand, mourning his wife and reeling from his son's near-death experience, sends his servant Eliezer to search for a wife for Isaac in hopes of fulfilling God's promise to make of him a mighty nation.

Jacob shows resilience when he is forced to wait 14 years to marry Rachel.

Joseph shows resilience after he is thrown in a pit by his own brothers and after he is thrown in jail once in Egypt. He digs deep, finds his grit and rises time after time to new heights.

Fast forward many years to the time of the destruction of the second Temple in Jerusalem. With nothing remaining as a conduit for the Jewish people to worship God, in utter devastation, a group of rabbis, led by Yochanan ben Zakkai, build a rabbinic academy in Yavneh and re-invent Judaism. They moved forward from that cataclysmic event and adapted to their new situation. They could have assimilated, or worse, committed mass suicide. But instead, they showed resilience and found a way to emerge from the rubble with a renewed sense of purpose and meaning.

It appears that resilience is part of our DNA.

In her book, *Road to Resilience*, Sherri Mandell shares her story about loss and resilience. In 2001, her 13 year-old son, Koby, and his friend Yosef Ishran went for an after-school hike near their home in the West Bank. Palestinian terrorists stoned them to death during what has come to be known as the Second Intifada. The murderers were never caught.

Mandell provides the reader with direction, taken from our Jewish tradition. She writes, “Jewish philosophy teaches that resilience is not overcoming, it’s becoming. Becoming more, becoming our fullest, deepest selves as a result of adversity. We don’t escape, but contemplate and reshape. We don’t leap over troubles as if they don’t exist. We allow them to be our teachers. We experience resilience when we are enlarged rather than diminished by our challenges, when facing adversity causes us to change, grow, and become greater.”<sup>3</sup>

She shares her seven spiritual steps of resilience: Chaos, community, choice, creativity, commemoration, consecration, celebration. It’s hard imagining “celebration” as a step, but Mandell teaches us, as an expert in

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<sup>3</sup> Mandell, Sherri Lederman. *Road to Resilience: from Chaos to Celebration*. The Toby Press, 2015.

resilience, that there can, indeed, be greater happiness after one has experienced pain. Getting to this point is not only psychological, it's spiritual. And walking this treacherous path is far from easy, but it is possible and necessary.

Building resilience is a life-long project. No matter the setback, we can call upon our resilience to help us through. So how can we build this trait?

We can develop a practice of gratitude. Sandberg suggests keeping a journal and recording each day the things we are grateful for. Things could always be worse. Yes, things can always be better too, but nevertheless, there is always goodness and joy in our lives. Sometimes we just have to look harder than others.

In his research, Adam Grant found that counting our blessings and expressing gratitude is not enough. In addition, we ought to also count our contributions. While feeling thankful is passive, "Contributions are active: they build our confidence by reminding us that we can make a difference."<sup>4</sup>

Seek community. In times of despair and sadness, we'll need people to count on, confide in and receive support and love from. Sandberg and Mandell both say that they could not have gotten through their personal tragedies had it not been for their loving friends and supportive community who helped nourish them back to life.

Show up for friends and loved ones when they are experience trauma. We can model how we hope people will act for us. It's common to shy away from talking to people after having experienced something unimaginable. Yet, it's more upsetting to them if we don't check in. Avoiding what we perceive to be uncomfortable conversations only makes things worse. Sandberg encourages us to "get in there" and just show up. Ask "How are you today?" and not simply "How are you?" Refrain from asking "What can I do for you"? since it places too much of a burden on those dealing with adversity. Just do something.

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<sup>4</sup> Sandberg & Grant., p. 68

At the same time, it's important to know that what one person needs another might not. So, gauge another's comfort and act accordingly.

Sandberg and Grant sing the praises of journaling about the specific traumatic events. Doing so “can decrease anxiety and anger, boost grades, reduce absences from work, and lessen the emotional impact of job loss. Health benefits include higher T-cell counts, better liver function, and stronger antibody responses.”<sup>5</sup> Writing, as many of you know, has the potential to be quite therapeutic.

Finally, develop a spiritual practice. According to Sandberg and Grant, “people with strong religious and spiritual beliefs show greater resilience and post-traumatic growth.”<sup>6</sup> Let Beth Israel or whichever house of worship you attend be your resilience gym. The Hebrew term for resilience is חוסן נפשי (ho-sen nafshi). It literally means the “strength of the soul.” A spiritual practice can build up our capacity to change course and flourish.

Developmental psychologist, Emmy Werner, conducted a thirty-two-year longitudinal study on resilience among 698 children. What she concluded was that the more resilient children “saw themselves as the orchestrators of their own fates.” In other words, in the face of tragedy, adversity, and failures, the confidence that we can still exert some control over our lives is key to overcoming whatever obstacle we may face.

On this most holy day of the year, may we all confront the adversity in our lives and turn away from despair. No matter how dire the situation, let us creatively adapt through our newfound resilience and come to celebrate life.

*Baruch atah Adonai eloheinu melech ha-olam ha-notein l'yaef koach.*  
Blessed are You, Source of all creation, who gives strength to the weary.

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 63

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 87

Chazak chazak v'nitchazek. Be strong, be strong and may we strengthen one another.