

# Resilience in Judaism | D'var Torah - March

20, 2020

## **Rabbi Laura Abrasley**

It's been a rough week in the world. I've been trying to take things day by day, hour by hour, moment by moment. And until yesterday, I was mostly managing. Maybe some of you were managing too. But yesterday afternoon, after a week of riding a roller coaster of emotions, after a week of being bombarded by the reality of human fragility and failure, after a week of wondering what could possibly come next, I found myself overwhelmed by sadness. I wept openly in my new home office, a comfortable red reading chair in the corner of our study and let myself feel the depth of the unknown.

It felt good to cry. To release my sadness, my anxiety, my anger, my fear. As the tears flowed, I took three deep breaths to reconnect with myself, and with the moment of now. I use this practice often. I have for years. Three deep, cleansing breaths to return to my body and spirit. As beautiful air filled my lungs, clarifying thoughts returned to my mind. I am strong. I am grounded. I am capable. I am resilient. I have the emotional tools to return to my center, even when it feels a little off kilter. Even when it feels completely off kilter. I have the tools of breath, of prayer, of community. I can access the resilience built into my DNA, a resilience built into Jewish tradition and ritual, and built into the DNA of every human being who wants or needs community right now.

Resilience in Judaism is ancient, found in the words of our foundational Exodus narrative, a story that leads us from slavery to freedom. A story we tell again and again. A story we share with every human who inhabits this earth, every soul in need of redemption. We share this story to welcome everyone with open arms into our sacred space. We share this story to open our hearts to suffering and meet people wherever they might be. We share this story to remind ourselves that in every generation there

will be both great challenges and great blessings. And that it is how we meet these challenges and share our blessings that will define us as people. Not just as a Jewish community. Not just as Newton or Boston or America. But as the remarkable, resilient, creative human race of which we are all part and parcel.

It occurs to me that this extraordinary story we've told for generations has the most opportunity for expansion in moments of crisis. Here in this moment of crisis we can become real partners in repairing the world with God. We can reach out to our neighbors, seeing them as God sees us, as Betzelem Elohim, created in the image of the Divine. We can create new methods of virtual connection and community. We can buy groceries for those most vulnerable. We can call and listen to those most isolated. And we can be generous with our blessings of prosperity and community by sharing them abundantly with one another and those in need.

In her book, Paradise Built in Hell, author Rebecca Solnit writes, "When all the ordinary divides and patterns are shattered, people step up—not all, but the great preponderance—to become their brothers' [and sisters'] keepers. And that purposefulness and connectedness bring joy even amidst death, chaos, fear and loss." Solnit's reminder of the opportunity to create purpose from the chaos echoes in this week's Torah portion, the final chapters of the book of Exodus. As the Israelites finish the work of building the Mishkan, the portable sacred space they carry with them on their journey into the wilderness, they have absolutely no idea what lays before them. Maybe this is why they spend so much time building the exquisitely detailed dwelling place for God's presence. They seek to create order in the disorder that their lives have become. While slavery may not have been so wonderful, at least it was familiar. But as they set out their journey toward the unknown, they will need to reorder and reinvent and reconnect in new ways, leaving behind what was and being in the moment of what is. They will need to complete the task of rebuilding this dwelling space every day. The power in this story is that the Israelites find real joy and connection in this sacred task, building over time a community of purpose and meaning. We are the inheritors of this ancient strength and knowledge.

Tonight, perhaps after a good cry and praying together with words that have held up the Jewish community for centuries, let us connect again with our own resilience. Let us find our own inner strength so that we might help create a new order out of this disorder. Let us find our breath to expand the ancient story of humanity, the story that shares how we can move from slavery to redemption. And let us find room to expand the story so that it includes everyone, a story that creates space for goodness and purpose, for connection and creativity, for good health, deep breaths and unexpected blessings.

Before we continue tonight's worship, let us collectively find our breath as this is where resilience begins. The mindfulness practice I share now is adapted from a practice by Rabbi Shefa Gold. It has provided comfort to me in recent days as I seek to cultivate strength to be in the moment and work to bring about redemption.

We begin by taking a deep breath – inhaling through our nose and exhaling through our mouth. Continue this practice as and focus on your breath as share the following words.

It is taught in Psalms, "Im aylech b'kerev tzarah, t'chayani... Even as I walk in the midst of trouble, You are giving me life..."<sup>1</sup> Oh, Divine Source of Strength, as I cultivate my resilience, give me strength to overcome the obstacles of reactivity, overwhelm, isolation and despair. Help me to find compassion, for myself and others, as I encounter difficulties in life. Remind me to be open to the unseen possibilities: the possibilities of joy, curiosity, creativity, insight, and perspective that are available moment by moment. Guide me as I encounter each new moment, as I strive to be present, to connect with the inner and outer resources always there. Renew my connection to the journey, to whatever may lie ahead, and return my belief that You are with me on this journey, and that Your story, our story, of resilience and connection can and will be renewed and reimagined, especially as we join together in sacred partnership.

Kein Yih Ratzon. May this be Your everlasting will.