

Our New Year's Resilience Resolution: Passing Life's Tests

Shanah Tovah.

Before we get to the well-known text that we read this morning about a ram, let me tell you a story about a donkey.

One morning, a donkey fell into a pit. The donkey cried and yelped for help for hours while his owners tried to figure out a way to get him out. Eventually, after many hours of trying, the owners gave up. The donkey was getting old anyway, so they figured they would just bury him right then and there.

So they took a shovel and started filling the pit with dirt.

Fortunately, the donkey was smart and had other plans.

Each time the dirt fell into the hole, the donkey stepped aside and used the new pile to climb just a bit higher out of the pit. Eventually, after an hour of shoveling, the exhausted owners stopped to rest. They were amazed when they saw the old donkey jump out of the pit, triumphant, and head out into the field!

The lesson? We will all face challenges in life. The question is whether we can overcome them, and perhaps even use them to raise ourselves a bit higher.

Life has a way of testing us from time to time. I have yet to meet anyone in my personal life, or through my work and a rabbi, who has escaped dealing with some type of challenge or another. Some face smaller difficulties or challenges; others, not so small. The question is not whether we will be “tested,” if that’s even the right word (I’ll come back to that). The question is how we will handle the adversity when it comes our way.

Our Torah reading for this morning, the story of the Akeidah, the binding of Isaac, is a classic example of someone whose faith in God, in life, is tested.

Rabbi Brad Artson, in his book of essays on this story, points out that the word *nisayon*, “test,” in biblical Hebrew, is translated as “experience” in modern Hebrew. This morning, as we read about this *nisayon*, we are forced to consider how we can take the experiences we have, from the most challenging to the least difficult, and even the merely annoying ones, and turn them into opportunities for growth.

You may have noticed that the Torah does not tell us why God put Abraham in this situation. In this narrative that has troubled readers for millennia, we are given no satisfactory explanation. It is not even clear to us, the modern reader, whether Abraham “passes” this test or fails it.

But one thing is clear: when presented with this ordeal, Abraham faces it directly:

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְהָ-אֱלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת-אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי

“Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test—saying to him, ‘Abraham.’

He answered, ‘Here I am.’”

Hinneri, “Here I am.”

With that one phrase, we learn that one of the first ways we are invited to handle adversity is to face it head-on.

We all know the expression that you can’t “run away from your problems,” because eventually they catch up with you anyway. The medical challenges that we have been ignoring. The relationship in need of repair that we have been minimizing. The major personal or professional decisions that we can’t seem to face and keep putting off.

When life gives us challenges, Abraham models for us the skill of facing them “head-on,” even when we are uncertain of the outcome.

I cannot imagine what Abraham was thinking when he said *hinneri*, “Here I am.” And yet, his faith in God, which we may or may not share in the same way, somehow saw him through. He was willing to tackle the problem even when he wasn’t sure of the solution.

You might not like Abraham's actions, and the story certainly can be troubling overall. Rabbi Artson explains:

Part of our struggle, no doubt, is that we object to a God who demands the sacrifice of what we love most. We hate that Abraham is called to demonstrate faithfulness by offering up his beloved son. We resent the imposition of suffering in a world that is too filled with pain and sorrow. Abraham, as our tradition recognizes, is a stand-in for each one of us. As the Talmud notes, "Sound a ram's horn before Me so that I remember on your behalf the binding of Isaac and count it as though you had bound yourselves before Me." (Rosh Hashanah 116a). The trial of Abraham tries us all. In his silent anguish, we feel an echo of our own pain. ¹

"But it's not fair!" we want to yell. Why should we have to accept the suffering and pain we will all inevitably encounter?

Perhaps this story is read now, on the day that we seek to return to our best selves, look forward to a new beginning, and pray for a sweet new year ahead, as a warning.

All will not go according to plan.

That is true on a personal level and on national and global levels. Even if we are not going through a personal time of challenge or suffering, we still face tremendous tests collectively. The incredible rise of antisemitism in this country, the obsession in the international community with vilifying Israel, and the deep

¹ Artson, *Passing Life's Tests*, p. 98

divisions that continue to manifest in our country and within the Jewish community, generationally and geographically.

I can't explain why suffering and struggling, collectively or individually, are a part of life that we all must endure. But our tradition helps us be prepared to respond. The lessons of this holiday are key to making sure we have the tools and strength to get through the times that will undoubtedly be hard.

So the first question is whether or not we can each muster the courage to say *hineni*, to face our trials. **The second question** is what we might learn from these moments of pain or struggle.

"The Zohar recognizes a hint of growth from the way the angel calls out his name as Abraham is about to slaughter his son. At the moment when Isaac is bound to the altar, as Abraham raises the knife high in the air, 'An angel of the Lord called to him from the heavens and said, 'Abraham! Abraham!'

"Why does the angel repeat Abraham's name twice? 'Rebbe Hiyya said... that the angel repeated Abraham's name in order to animate him with a new spirit and to spur him to new activity with a new heart.'² **Having faced his suffering directly, having been willing to learn from his terrible trial, Abraham emerges with a new spirit and a new heart.** Indeed, the Zohar claims that the angels shouted, 'Abraham! Abraham!' to show that 'the latter Abraham was not like the former Abraham; the latter was the perfected Abraham, while the former was still incomplete.'³ Out of the horror of his suffering, Abraham changes. Abraham grows."⁴

² Zohar 119b

³ Zohar 119b

⁴ Artson, 102

We see that Abraham faced this test, this challenge directly. But how can we really know whether he “learned” something from the experience, as the Zohar suggests?

On the one hand, we cannot. On the other hand, in the chapters of the Torah following this terrible incident, we see Abraham's attention turning more toward his family, focusing on finding a burial place for Sarah and finding a wife for Isaac.

There is no record in the Torah of Abraham and Isaac ever speaking again after the Akedah. But the narrative suggests that Abraham learned the importance of fighting for his family after this terrible ordeal. Abraham seems to have changed, and perhaps even grown.

In over two decades of serving as a rabbi, I have been privileged to walk alongside people in terrible moments of suffering: the loss of a parent, the loss of a child, the loss of a marriage, terminal diagnoses, the loss of a home, the loss of a job, the darkness and fear of struggling with mental health challenges. And I have spent a lot of time witnessing the incredible ways people face these challenges. Where do they get the strength? What allows them to say *hinneni* and bravely endure these moments head-on, rather than just retreating from the world? And how do they, like Abraham, change or grow from these painful experiences?

While there is not one simple “formula” for making it through those moments when we, like Isaac, find ourselves “bound up” by life’s challenges, there is increasing scientific research showing that the key to tackling and ideally even learning or growing from experiences that we might rather have avoided, is resilience.

A few months ago, our very own Ben Laskowitz recommended a book called *The Healing Power of Resilience* by Dr. Tara Narula, a cardiologist and chief medical correspondent for ABC News. The book is part self-help and part scientific research, but it all focuses on strategies for walking through life with a resilient mind, body, and spirit. Narula argues that resilience is a gift we have all been given, but it is also a skill we must learn to build and develop. Managing stress, challenges, and even traumatic experiences takes practice and tools.

In her book, Dr. Narula outlines eight steps for building resilience. Let me walk through them because they are so relevant and instructive as we enter a new year.

#1: Accept the situation.

Narula writes, “It all goes back to the practice of accepting what we cannot change and learning to change what we can.”⁵

⁵ p. 61

This sounds simple, but it is not. Resilience begins with recognizing reality as it is. We cannot change everything that happens to us. But we can ask: What *can* I change? What *is* within my control? And where do I need to let go?

#2: Embrace a flexible mindset.

Narula explains that approaching life's daily stressors as normal, healthy challenges, and even as opportunities for growth, can actually alter our physiological response to stress.⁶ A challenge does not have to be a catastrophe. A hard moment does not always have to turn into a disaster. Sometimes these moments can be invitations to learn, adapt, and grow.

#3: Get fit.

Dr. Narula writes that "day in and day out, we need to seek out good stress, the kind produced by physical exertion and exercise. This does wonders to mitigate the bad stress."⁷ Taking care of these holy bodies that carry us through life is not only a responsibility, but also a way to prepare for when things really get tough.

#4: Face our fears.

Narula writes, "Fear ... is often the first signal that an event might be challenging." Courage "isn't the absence of fear, but the ability to

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acknowledge fear and confront it. It's about choosing a course of action despite our fear, making choices based on our values and goals, even when those choices are uncertain.”⁸ In other words, she is reminding us of Abraham saying *Hinneni* “Here I am,” when he experienced great fear and uncertainty.

#5: Build connections.

More on this on Yom Kippur, but for now, let us simply say that there is ample research concerning the dangers of isolation and the importance of social connection. Part of getting through life's challenges means not trying to do everything alone. So take a few moments today to nurture your essential connections with others. Call a friend. Check in on someone. These connections are essential to our resilience.

#6: Seek out loving relationships—with others and with yourself.

Dr. Narula writes:

Allow yourself to love and be loved. Make finding love, fostering love, and growing love a priority, just as you would eating a healthy diet, exercising, or getting enough sleep. Love is not only the best medicine; it is truly the elixir of life.⁹

Rededicating ourselves to those we love is another core part of the experience we are meant to have during these Days of Awe.

⁸ 126

⁹ 188–189

#7: Find hope and have faith.

Hope, Dr. Narula explains, is the possibility of a better future combined with the belief that you can help work to make that future happen.¹⁰ Dr. Narula points to research showing that religious practice can be an important source of resilience. Studies have found associations between regular participation in religious communities and lower rates of depression and anxiety, and research has also suggested that practices such as prayer and meditation can help people cope with stress, pain, and difficult circumstances.¹¹

That said, I do want to acknowledge that we must be careful about what we take from this research. Faith does not guarantee protection from suffering. Religious people get sick. Even the most devout encounter struggle and pain. And people who do not believe in God, or who do not participate in faith communities, can live deeply meaningful and resilient lives. But there is something here worth paying attention to. Living a life of faith, taking time to connect with God, the universe, a higher power, or simply with the concept of something larger than ourselves, can help us stay grounded when life becomes uncertain.

We come here, year after year, not because we know what the future will bring, but because we know we will need strength to face uncertainty. Faith does not

¹⁰ 192–193

¹¹ 200

tell us everything will be okay. Faith gives us the courage to show up even when we are not sure what comes next.

And finally, #8: Find your purpose.

Again, there is science behind this. Dr. Narula explains:

People with a sense of purpose are less prone to suffer from chronic stress and may be less likely to experience (some) chronic diseases...Studies have found that people with a sense of purpose tend to have lower levels of inflammatory markers in their blood, and there are indications that they may also have more robust immune systems.¹²

Well, today is certainly the right place and the right time for this. These Days of Awe are all about finding purpose. This entire season is about *cheshbon hanefesh*, literally "taking an accounting of our soul." What are our goals? What is our purpose? Are we living an intentional and purposeful life? These are wonderful Rosh Hashanah questions, and it turns out that they are scientifically significant as well.

So, to recap: What is Dr. Narula's recipe for building the resilience we need in order to face and endure the challenges we will all experience? *Acceptance*.

¹² 224

Flexible thinking. Exercise. Facing our fears. Focusing on our relationships. Loving ourselves and others. Strengthening our faith. Discovering our purpose.

There is nothing particularly new or revolutionary about this advice; it's all things we have heard before, things we know can and will improve our lives. And yet that doesn't make this easy, and we can all use a reminder. Rosh Hashana is our tradition's built-in annual reminder.

I found echoes of this message of resilience in another book that I read this past year, entitled "When We See You Again," by Rachel Goldberg-Polin whose son Hersh was taken hostage on October 7th and ultimately murdered. Many of you may be familiar with this story and have witnessed the pain Rachel and her husband Jon endured over the past almost three years. This book is her way of sharing and processing how she herself has navigated through this horrific time.

At one point in her book, Rachel describes finding a letter marked "private" in Hersh's room. It was the spring of 2024. She knew at that point that Hersh was still alive and being held captive in Gaza. Eventually, the family decided it was time to open the letter, to hear words from a brother and son that they had not heard from in so long and might never hear from again. Hersh wrote this letter in 2015, nine years earlier, and it was eerily "prophetic." Describing his adjustment to life in Israel after recently making aliyah, he wrote:

Life is like the world, in order to exist you have to love and work hard.

Every so often you arrive at a tunnel and you enter the unknown and you don't know when you will get out.

To walk in the dark, in the beginning you are upset and you are not ready and you feel that you arrived at the edge, but it is not the exit or the end, it is just a change in the situation.

It is possible there will be improvement, but for the time being, there is none.

But also the one who is in the tunnel knows there will be an end to it, and that this is not the final tunnel.

To every person there is a tunnel that belongs to them.

Some have small tunnels and some have long tunnels.

What is certain is there is an end.

How much time it will take to get to the end of the tunnel depends on the person.

If it is with despair, it will take a longer time. Or, if you enter with all of your might, it will pass quicker.

*My tunnel was when I was the "new" one, but like **everything** in life, I passed through the tunnel.*

*Who knows how many more tunnels I will encounter, but in contrast to the previous tunnel I entered, I will enter this one with all of my might and hope to pass through it **more easily**.*

But whatever comes my way, it won't stop me.

It will only slow me down, but I'm not afraid to slow down or even to make a U-turn.

What is sure is that I am walking to the end of the tunnel.

Hersh wrote these words when he was 15 years old. He mentioned the word tunnel twelve times, obviously not knowing that nine years later he would be held captive in an actual tunnel for 330 days.

Or Levy, another hostage who was finally released after 491 days, was with Hersh through parts of his captivity and told Rachel and Jon that when he first saw Hersh walking into the tunnel where he was shackled for the first seven weeks, unable to move, he did so carrying a book! Rachel wrote:

*Or and the others were baffled. **A BOOK?** Everyone was losing their minds and suddenly, a novel appeared in those depths of Gaza. Hersh explained that he had told his captors he was an avid reader and that he needed a book, any book. And somehow, some way, in the bedlam of Gaza they found a book, in English, and gave it to him. It was Shadow and Bone by Leigh Bardugo. What?*

Hersh told Or he had been reading it over and over because it was all he had...a lifeline to the world outside of the subterranean torture, bondage and confinement of Gaza's tunnels.

Rachel continued:

We were also deeply moved to learn about another book that Hersh was carrying with him, metaphorically, and sharing. Or explained that Hersh had repeated, like a mantra, a line from Frankl's Man's Search for Meaning. Frankl had survived the concentration camps of World War II... [and] said, "He who has a WHY can bear any how."

Or said Hersh repeated that specific line of wisdom to everyone in that tunnel. "What is your WHY?" he kept asking over and over. They talked about their individual purposes and reasons to live. Reminding themselves

*that if they could identify their purpose for being in This World, then each of them would have the motivation to find a way to survive...*¹³

In the deepest darkness of his captivity, Hersh was not willing to give up on hope. Even when living through the ultimate uncertainty, he was not willing to give up on the possibility that there was a way to hold onto purpose. And even though, tragically, Hersh did not come home alive, his message, his optimism, and his resilient spirit live on; through those who met him in captivity and through all of us who now know his story. Judging by what we know of his parents, Rachel and Jon, he came by it honestly.

Hayom harat olam—today is the day when the world was created anew. The word *harat* is related to the Hebrew word for pregnancy, *herayon*. Taking some poetic license, we might say: although we face a future *filled with uncertainty*, today is a day that is still *pregnant with possibility*.

Like Abraham, we will each face moments that test us, likely more than once; of that, I have no doubt. And, like Abraham, we will each be challenged to respond *hinnenî*, “Here I am.” We cannot know what this new year will bring. We cannot know every bend in the road, every challenge we will face, or every thicket in which we may find ourselves caught, or in Hersh’s words, every tunnel

¹³ Goldberg-Polin, *When We See You Again*, 124, 125, 138, 139

we may find ourselves in. But we can try to take the next step. We can journey into the unknown, not without fear, but with intention, **resilience**, and faith. And when we cannot see the path ahead, we must remind ourselves that we do not have to know where the journey ends. We only have to be willing to take the next step.

On this Rosh Hashanah, let us consider what we might bring into this new year, and how we might *respond* anew to the stresses and trials that will inevitably follow. May the sound of the shofar pierce through the stress, the worry, and the anxiety that will inevitably arise this year, stirring us to action. May this sacred alarm direct our attention to the work of *teshuvah*: to returning, to beginning, and to trying again.

Shanah Tovah.