

RESILIENCE: ROSH HASHANAH 5779

If I mention Las Vegas Golden Knights, some of you will say “Who?” Others will say, “What’s wrong with our rabbi? He begins his Rosh Hashanah message not with praise for the Stanley Cup winners, our Washington Capitols, but by mentioning their opponents from, of all places, Las Vegas. Where could he possibly go in this talk?”

I am a rabid sports fan but hockey is not a sport I follow. What, then, could be my purpose in drawing on a rival team, thousands of miles from our homes, at this crucial time?

I won’t try to dazzle you with the x’s and o’s of hockey strategy. I don’t pretend to know those intricacies. I can however share with you my admiration for a team that helped to rally a shaken city, restoring it after tragedy.

The Golden Knights, the first major league sports team in Las Vegas, began its inaugural season last October. On October 1, just days before they would play their first game, a deranged individual opened fire from his 32nd-floor hotel room, killing 58 people and injuring hundreds who had come to attend a country music festival. This mass shooting, one of the deadliest in our country where deadly shootings occur far too frequently, took place just a mile south of the T-Mobile Arena where the Golden Knights play.

Could they begin their season under more dire circumstances? How could the team respond? Shortly after the gruesome incident, the players spread out across the Las Vegas community, thanking police officers, donating blood and tens of thousands of dollars to support victims, their families and emergency medical workers. Their generous spirits endeared them to the city's shocked and grieving residents. One resident of Las Vegas whose friend died in the shooting captured the essence of the team's response when she said, "When athletes can put the money and fame aside, it says something." Another fan who attended almost every home game in this very successful first season said that the team helped the city look ahead, not back. "The team wrapped themselves around the town and the town wrapped themselves around the team."

For me, in this year when we have faced so many assaults on our nation and its glory, the example of the Golden Knights and the people of Las Vegas to heal and persevere stands as a shining example of resilience. I think learning and cultivating resilience is vital to our personal, communal and national well-being.

Earlier this year, I learned a lot about resilience from Andrew Reiner who admits that he "struggles to stay buoyant when life's daily waters grow rough." Writing in the Post's Health section, Reiner identifies himself as a QUICK SINKER. [example responding to a traffic jam] He seeks to gain resilience by facing the things that knock him off

balance and push him toward his characteristic gloom. He asks, “Could I possibly find meaning in the[se] stressors” and thus move forward rather than heading down the familiar rut. Strikingly, he turns to Viktor Frankl’s memoir, “Man’s Search for Meaning,” a book I first read as a freshman in college. Frankl manages to overcome the depths of his Auschwitz experience by finding meaning in his suffering. You may remember how Frankl describes how he turned back from a seemingly successful escape attempt because he could not abandon his patients dying of typhoid. He writes, “Suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice.”

Reiner also suggests from his own experience that we can learn to be more resilient by being more grateful. He recounts that while trying to recall all his blessings, he was nevertheless walking with his head down trying to fight off the “leaden frustrations” of a QUICK SINKER. I almost knocked down a panhandler. “I gave him a dollar and he said, “God bless you brother.” His blessing lifted me. I surged with the “helper’s high.” When a few minutes later I held the door to a book store open for an older, hobbling woman, she said, “It’s nice to see that chivalry is not dead. “My brain hummed,” he noted.

Finding meaning and feeling grateful for our blessings are then two components of a strategy of resilience. Our tradition, you will not be surprised, offers models of resilience also. Let’s remember that we are “the ever-dying people.” The fact is that thousands of years after

the cultures of Persia, Greece and Rome (to name just a few) have become distant memories, Jewish civilization continues. Within our tradition, look, for example, at Ruth and Naomi, vulnerable women, bereft of material possessions and key family members, who are able to rebuild and reattach themselves to life, even creating a new family. Remember how Jacob recovered from poverty, the hostility of his brother Esau and the rejection of his father-in-law Lavan to restore himself and his household. And even more profoundly, consider the way the Rabbis choose to narrate the life of Avraham. In their formulation, the many events in the life of Avraham become a narrative of resilience. In Avot 5:3 they say “Avraham our father was tested through ten tests and he stood up to all of them.” Leaving his home, sending Yishmael away and binding Isaac on the altar are but three of those tests. For the Rabbis, Avraham’s life is not the saga of a superhero. Rather it is the story of a person who encounters adversity. Life tests him. Although he is knocked down, he always stands up again. He exemplifies the wisdom seen in the book of Proverbs, “The righteous person falls seven times but each time gets up [again] (Proverbs 24:18).

Since I read Andrew Reiner’s article and because of the experience of the Golden Knights and Las Vegas I have been on the look out for examples of resilience to share with you today. As I look around this sanctuary, I see many people who have demonstrated exemplary resilience as they battle challenges of all kinds. As I detail some, let

me ask you to search your own experience for other examples. Many of you have been knocked down in the last year. You refused to stay down; you stood up demonstrating your resilience.

I visited a long-time member of the Ohr Kodesh community as she was bedridden at the Hebrew Home. I joined two of her children around her bed and learned that in the last days they had been reading her accounts of her life to their Mom. She was pleased to hear them and even more pleased that she had made the effort to provide her children and grandchildren with many glimpses into her life experiences, her thoughts and her hopes and concerns. When I asked her why she had assigned and accepted this serious task to herself, she added simply and profoundly, “I knew very little about my parents and grandparents; I resolved that my children and grandchildren would know me.” I thanked her and asked her if I could present her story on Rosh Hashanah. Graciously she agreed. In my opinion her story captures an important aspect of resilience. She could have reacted to her experience with bitterness and stopped there. Instead she said “hineni”/I accept the facts of my life situation, I learn from them and carry them with me as I stand up and move ahead writing countless pages so that my family would know me.

Consider Nina Walker; her name may not be familiar to us, but we should all aspire to her resilience. In 2002, after her 22 year-old daughter was killed by a drunk and drugged driver, Nina began to

overcome her anger by volunteering for MADD. For the next 15 years, Nina spoke to many high schools, Victim Impact Panels and other groups raising awareness about the personal devastation caused by impaired drivers. During those years she and her husband also raised their daughter's son, their grandson, who was orphaned of his mother at age 3. Nina did not curse the darkness. With resolve, she lit a candle.

While I could identify many other cases of personal resilience, I will touch on just one more. It is very fresh in all our thoughts.

The late Senator John McCain was a politician with many of the foibles of contemporary politicians. While I appreciated many of his legislative efforts, I certainly did not agree with all of them. What I admire without question in Senator McCain was his life of resilience. He often kidded about the fact that he graduated near the bottom of his class at the United States Naval Academy. We all know that he spent more than five years as a prisoner of war in Vietnam, a victim of torture and a tool of enemy propagandists. He rejected early release in order to maintain his honor and to identify with his fellow prisoners. When he finally returned to his country, he rose above the many physical and emotional challenges he faced to serve his state and his country with honor and distinction. As many have noted, he cared more about the nation's well-being than his own. Like one of his mentors Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson, McCain put America's ideals before party loyalty. Like Jackson, McCain could admit when

he was wrong. Once again he demonstrated remarkable resilience during the last period of his life when he faced the challenge of an aggressive brain tumor that ultimately claimed his life.

Recognizing and even admiring resilient individuals and groups is the first goal of this talk. Ideally each of us can find her or his path to resilience so that we stand up to our challenges, learn from them and move ahead. This year there is a third level on which we need to work. In my estimation, we must accept the challenge to respond with resilience to the shortcomings in our nation. Where we find corruption, we must root it out. Where we see selfishness, we must exemplify altruism. Where discourse is not civil, we must speak with respect for everyone, even our political opponents with whom we disagree most profoundly. We must champion human dignity when it is disparaged. We cannot sit on the sidelines as the elections of November approach and as the crucial issues of our time are debated.

If by resilience we mean the inner strength to solve problems, to overcome obstacles, to grow from mistakes and to keep moving ahead, may we all be blessed with resilience as we face our personal, familial and national challenges.