

Rabbi Beth H Klafter
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Opening Gates of Resilience

Over the summer, I happened upon a paperback at a used book sale. I liked the feel of the cover and the pages, so I took it home. I had never heard of or about the author, Sarah Lewis, curator and researcher, Assistant Professor at Harvard University. The book is called, The Rise: Creativity, the Gift of Failure, and the Search for Mastery. This serendipitous find has opened windows of thought for me, leading me to other texts, sources and authors in recent months, among them Brene Brown [Rising Strong, Daring Greatly], Angela Duckworth [Grit], and Paul & Lucy Kalathini [When Breath Becomes Air].

The Rise begins with Lewis' description of a practice session of the Women's Archery Team at Columbia University. She begins: "*The [athletes] stepped out of the team van on a cold spring afternoon with a relaxed focus.*" After several hours on the field with the women, Lewis observes, "*[Archery] requires constant reinvention ... [It] is one of the sports that gives instantaneou*s, precise feedback. Archers constantly deal with the 'near win': not quite hitting the mark, but seconds later, proving that they can."

On Yom Kippur, we pray the Vidui: "Our God, God of our mothers and fathers, grant that our prayers may reach You. We confess: *chatanu, aveenu, pashanu*: we have sinned. Why three words, all meaning 'sin?' Because there is a nuanced difference among them:

"*Aveenu*"-- we have committed an injustice.

"*Pashanu*" -- we have broken the rules; we have transgressed.

"*Chatanu*"-- we have missed the mark.

I have always found this third definition – sin is missing the mark -- to be the most helpful, relevant and meaningful. Like the archer, we aim and we miss; we aim and we miss; and then what? I believe the sin is not in missing the target; I believe the sin is when we stop trying to hit it.

There is a phrase called, "Target Panic," considered to be (quote) "The Secret Curse of Expert Archers." It occurs when master shooters lose control of their bows and their composure. The archer 'freezes up and cannot release at all.'" (Katie Thomas, NY Times) Yom Kippur invites us to face our own kind of 'target panic.' To ask ourselves, What might be frozen in me? What may be preventing me from aiming, and aiming again, and again, if necessary, at a task or a goal?

Being willing and able to pick up the next arrow, in the face of failures and troubles, in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges, is the power, the gift and the strength of resilience.

As individuals and as a community, in our private lives and in the public sphere, it occurs to me - that we all may need a measure of resilience in the year 5778.

The American Psychological Association defines resilience "*as the process of adapting [and continuing to act] in adversity...[It] is not a trait that people either have or do not have. It involves behaviors, thoughts and actions that can be learned and developed in anyone.*"

If resilience is like a muscle that can be strengthened, a skill that can be learned, then its coaching can be found in many places as well. Yet we don't do so. I think there are many overlapping reasons we may develop our own forms of 'target panic.' On the high holidays, we confess. Chatanu, we have sinned. For the times when we may have stopped – or didn't even start – making the effort to change, to grow, to achieve, to land in a better place tomorrow than we are today, we ask forgiveness. We will dedicate ourselves anew.

First, we may perceive the task itself as overwhelming, too hard, too distant, too immense to tackle. It may be something as personal as getting my body in shape, starting a diet or exercise plan. It may be taking on a new project at work or launching a new program in the community.

On Rosh HaShana I laid out many of the issues as I see them in our nation today. We may feel that we cannot accomplish anything (or enough), on our own to effect social change or address fundamental, systemic ills. We see the monumental work of recovering and rebuilding lives and communities after the hurricanes and earthquakes of recent weeks. We may shake our heads and stay on the sidelines of the field, waiting for the rest of the team to show up, so to speak.

Here the oft-repeated words of Pirke Avot ring true: "*Lo Alecha ham'la'cha ligmore* It is not your duty to complete the work; it is not up to you to finish it. *V'lo atah ben chorim l'hibatel mimena* But neither are you free to desist from it."

Another reason we may put the bow down is because we don't want to aim yet again and miss the bulls-eye. It feels easier not to try at all, than to try and fail. The fear of failure is immense; the pain and remorse loom large.

A poet has written, "The Need to Win:"

*When an archer is shooting for nothing, he has all his skill
If he shoots for a brass buckle, he is already nervous.
If he shoots for a prize of gold, he goes blind or sees two targets.
His skill has not changed, but the prize divides him.
He thinks more of winning than of shooting
And the need to win - drains his power.*

(Chuang Tzu, 4th c Chinese philosopher)

To be resilient we will need to maintain our power and our strength.

Many years ago my mother wrote an essay after she learned how to cross country ski. I have often heard the title in my mind, “To FALL is Not to FAIL – an I Makes the Difference.” She explained how the ski instructor first taught them how to fall. Mom described, *“He proceeded to show us how to fall to the left and to the right, forward and back, on an incline and on a flat surface. Each time we had to actually fall. It was an exhilarating and liberating experience I never acquired a new skill as quickly or confidently,”* admitted my mom. My mother learned then, and has taught me with these words, that we need not be afraid to fall. Falling and failing are actually necessary steps along the way to achievement.

We can be more productive and satisfied if our goal is continued improvement: being better than last time, not seeking perfection, instead striving for excellence – that can be the measure of our success. A character in the animated film, “Meet the Robinsons,’ tells us: *“From failing, you learn. From success, not so much.”*

We may also find it hard to move forward with resilience because we are stuck in ‘our own narratives,’ as I discussed on the eve of Rosh HaShana. Sometimes we have to live in discomfort to see beyond it. I was never going to be the one who got divorced; until I got divorced nearly 15 years ago. The emotional and practical adjustments were enormous. Before I could undertake them, first, I had accept that these were now my challenges, my new normal, my “Option B.”

Getting ‘stuck in our own narratives’ is explained in another way. There is a phenomenon called The Einstellung Effect which “occurs when preexisting knowledge impedes one’s ability to reach a solution. ... The brain attempts to work efficiently by referring to past solutions without giving the current problem much thought. Whether we are aware of it or not, we are caught in an old mindset.” Like the old adage, “If your only tool is a hammer, everything starts to look like a nail.” When we act with resilience, we are mindful and open to utilizing an assortment of tools and resources in our lives.

Surely we have all found ourselves standing – or perhaps too weary to stand – in an emotionally dark place; sadness, anger, loss may engulf us. Just lifting our eyes to find a glimmer of light feels beyond our scope. When in that place, perhaps Shakespeare’s sentiment in King Lear may prove helpful: *“This is not the worst / So long as we can say /This is the worst.”* The phrase, “This too shall pass,” *Gam Zeh Yaavor*, in Hebrew, has brought comfort in different languages and cultures for generations. Shortly after my mother died twenty years ago, someone told me, “You won’t always feel this way,” and that sentence has be very meaningful many times in my life. Accepting these lessons may provide the vision we need to see just beyond the darkness in some measure.

I believe that we can begin harnessing the power and inspiration of resilience when we can draw from our collective history and when we can see ourselves in the stories of others.

On the second day of Rosh HaShana, I spoke about Michelangelo. The world has benefited from the resilience of the artist which enabled him to complete his masterpiece, painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, despite the fact that he feared he would fail as a painter (he thought he was only a sculptor) and despite the fact that the work itself was physically arduous for years. If he could do that, perhaps we can aim at a masterpiece of our own too.

Theodore Roosevelt delivered a speech over a century ago, nicknamed “The Man in the Arena:” *[It is] the man who is in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again... and who, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly.*” When our faces or spirits are marred, Roosevelt’s words can inspire us to lift ourselves up in our own arenas.

Judaism’s models and lessons of resilience span not only the centuries, but millennia. The prophet Zechariah called us “*Ashrey HaTikvah*,” ‘prisoners of hope.’ It’s almost as though we have no choice but to survive. To survive as a community and in a community.

For example, when a loved one dies, traditionally, mourners sit close to the ground during shiva. At the end of shiva, we get up and walk outside, often with others beside us, taking a resilient step forward in our lives.

In Proverbs we are taught: “For a righteous man falls seven times and rises again, but the wicked stumble under adversity.” (24:16)

Judaism is a faith of resilience.

The historical examples are too numerous to count:

- The Maccabees reclaimed and rededicated the temple, fighting the much larger ruling powers
- Judaism has culturally flourished in our new homes after being exiled from so many places
- Our people rose out of the ashes of the Holocaust to see the birth of the State of Israel and the birth of children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren of survivors.

The biblical instances of resilience begin with Adam and Eve. When life in the Garden of Eden was no longer an option, they had to leave the only home they had ever known and begin anew. Joseph was sold into slavery in a strange land, thrown into a dungeon prison; he worked himself up - not only out of the dungeon, but to a position of great power and responsibility in Egypt. If they could do that, perhaps I can too.

On Rosh HaShana, we read the story of the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac, when God calls Abraham to offer his son as a sacrifice. To be saved in the final moments by a ram caught in the thicket. Rabbi Menahem Mendle of Kotzk posed a question: “*What was the hardest part of the*

Akedah for Abraham? Was it the initial call, the long walk to Moriah, or the binding of his precious son? The hardest part,” he answered, “was coming down the mountain.”

Imagine what Abraham may have been thinking as he was returning home? Knowing he had to face his wife, Sarah. Knowing he had to find his place as Isaac's father after this harrowing event. Presumably, Abraham traveled on a long, complicated & difficult emotional road. He can be a model for us when we, too, may have to rebuild a relationship in our lives.

Elie Wiesel writes about Isaac in his book, Messengers of God. “Why was the most tragic of our ancestors named Isaac, Yitzchak, a name which [in Hebrew] signifies laughter? Here is why. As the first survivor, he had to teach us, the future survivors of Jewish history, that it is possible to suffer and despair an entire lifetime and still not give up the art of laughter.” It is Isaac's resilience, encoded in his name and his life that can encourage us too.

As we draw from the resilience of our ancestors and our tradition. Knowing we are not alone in the experience may be just the strength we need.

Still how does an immobilizing state of distress, doubt or exhaustion (our own form of ‘target panic’ like the archer) transform into a moment when resilience and hope lift us up?

Another book I read this summer, When Breath Becomes Air, is a memoir by Paul Kalathini, published posthumously. He was 36 years old, completing his residency in neurosurgery when diagnosed with advanced lung cancer. The first part of the book describes his life as a doctor; the second part describes his life as a patient. Dr. Kalathini wrote, “I began to realize that coming face to face with my own mortality, in a sense, had changed *nothing* and *everything*.” Poignantly, he expressed, “Seven words from Samuel Becket [repeated] in my head: ‘I can’t go on. I’ll go on.’”

I have been thinking a great deal about the moment between “I can’t go on” and “I’ll go on.” ‘I can’t go on. I’ll go on’ has become like a ‘hymn of resilience’ for me.

I draw from my own experience.

I glean inspiration and lessons from events and individuals in history.

I hold the rituals and texts of the Jewish people with a firm grip for inspiration and insight.

I find the support and assistance from those around me, from my community.

I consciously, intentionally shift my aim from perfection to excellence.

I embrace failing and falling as part of my journey.

I fill my quiver with all of these.

Then what?

I have come to believe that there is another element between 'I can't go on' and 'I'll go on'. A flash which changes *nothing* and changes *everything*. Some may call this God. Some may call this a divine presence. Some may call this the spark of our humanity.

In that instant, we open the 'gates of our own souls'. On Yom Kippur, the 'gates of prayer' and the 'gates of repentance' are open in the heavens above according to tradition. At this sacred season, may we find the courage to open the gates of our own souls as well to embrace the strength and the power of our own resilience.

May we be the authors of our own lives, daring greatly and rising strong in 5778.