

### Finding Life in the Transitions

Cantor Cohen: Rabbi...

Rabbi Peltz: (*briskly*) Yes?

Cantor Cohen: Isn't it sermon time now?

Rabbi Peltz: (*briskly*) Uh, Yeah.

Cantor Cohen: (*Pausing, looking confused*) So are you going to start?

Rabbi Peltz: I think they're real.

Cantor Cohen: What?

Rabbi Peltz: I think they're real.

Cantor Cohen: Who's real?

Rabbi Peltz: (*gesturing to congregation*) Them!

Cantor Cohen: No, they're not real.

Rabbi Peltz: Yes, they are real! They are not cardboard cutouts this year!

Cantor Cohen: You think?

Rabbi Peltz: I know how to check. If they are real, they will respond when I say *shanah tovah*. Let's try it: *Shanah Tovah*!

Congregation: *Shanah Tovah!*

*Rabbi Peltz and Cantor Cohen looked stunned*

Cantor Cohen: Maybe they are real! Let me try something: *L'dor vaDor*

Congregation: *L'dor vador!* X2

Cantor Cohen: Whoah. Definitely real.

Rabbi Peltz: Yup, no holiday heads this year. We've got real live people.

Cantor Cohen: Real live people.

Rabbi Peltz: Wow. Rabbi Wexler, can you believe it? Rabbi Wexler?

*(Rabbi Peltz walks over to Rabbi Wexler, who is not there, only his holiday head is at his seat.)*

*Rabbi Peltz brings it to the lectern.)* Rabbi Wexler?! No!!!!!!!!!!!!

Cantor Cohen: I knew he was too good to be true! *(the real Rabbi Wexler walks out)*

The Holiday Heads were fun last year, but it's much nicer to hear your laughter in our sanctuary. That's the sound of celebration, of joy, of community. I hope that all of you on the livestream were laughing and experiencing that sense of joy that comes with being in community too. While we've had our good times, I've missed laughing, singing and celebrating all together this past year.

Last summer, I started writing a sermon about lessons we've learned from the pandemic. As Rosh Hashanah approached, it seemed too soon, so I filed it away, thinking: at least I'll have my sermon done for next year! It was looking good in July. But then, as cases started to rise again, I realized that it was still too soon. We are all still learning how to live in the uncertainty. The nature of our experience keeps changing: from lockdowns to quarantines to masks to no masks and then back to masks again -- we are constantly in a state of transition.

Transitions – this is what we mark today. Rosh Hashanah is a holiday that celebrates the transition from one year to the next. Our Jewish new year is a time for us to look inward. We do *teshuva*h – reflect on our words and our deeds, and consider our lives, our choices and our relationships. Judaism sees transitions as moments of tremendous potential. They are opportunities for reflection, learning and growth. Yet they can also be moments of anxiety, stress, and frustration.

In addition to the transitions imposed by COVID, there are many other major transitions confront us. Climate change is transitioning us to a world with more extreme weather, like floods, fires and tornadoes. Cryptocurrency is causing a transition in banking. Countries like Afghanistan are going through painful transitions. Politics both here and in Israel seem to be in a constant state of transition. And then there is Antisemitism, on both the right and the left, that has been transitioning more into the mainstream. And with it has come the unfounded demonization of Israel in progressive circles that has caused some to transition their loyalties – even when it comes to ice cream!

What it means to be a part of a community is also undergoing a transition. With our virtual options, moving out of town no longer means that you have to find a new synagogue. Our members have attended services, classes and programs from Center City, Florida, the Shore and elsewhere around the world. We can stay connected to each other virtually, like many of you are doing at this very moment.

There are also the transitions we are experiencing in our own lives. Some have become parents; some have lost loved ones. There have been job changes, upsizing, downsizing, sending a child to college, spending more time alone, spending more time together.

What has changed in your life this past year? How has it affected you, and your family? How do these transitions make you feel? Scared? Excited? Confused? Exhausted? All of the above?

The great psychologist William James once said that “Life is in the transitions.” That’s because it is during these moments that we can find our greatest opportunities for learning and growth. Just like we try to do today, on Rosh Hashanah. James’ quote inspired

the title of Bruce Feiler's newest book "Life is in the Transitions." Feiler argues that people are experiencing more transitions in their lives than ever before. And Feiler wrote this book *before* the pandemic! He tallies 52 different sources of conflict, upheaval, or stress a person can face. These range from the voluntary (losing weight, starting a company), to the involuntary (being fired, discovering your child has special needs); from the personal (getting sober, losing a loved one) to the collective (joining a social movement or enduring a pandemic). The ways we manage and live through these transitions recalibrate our life stories.<sup>1</sup> They are, Feiler writes, "autobiographical occasions, when we simply must take the opportunity to revisit, revise and restart our internal autobiographers, making some tweaks, adding a new chapter or two, elevating or devaluating certain themes."<sup>2</sup>

This is what we do today in the *Sefer Hayim* – the book of life. On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. *V'yad Kol Adam Hotem Bo* -- It is a book that we each sign with our deeds. Today we begin our review of our *sefer hayim*. We consider the triumphs and the setbacks, the love and the loss. This is not simply an exercise in remembering, but rather it is an opportunity to make changes to our autobiographies, big and small. Our tradition hardwires this time for transitions into our calendar each year. On Rosh Hashanah, we seek to find life in the transitions.

As I looked back on my *Sefer Hayim*, the moment of transition I found most meaningful this past year was celebrating Yael's Bat Mitzvah in March. A Bat Mitzvah of course is a transition itself – a child becomes a Jewish adult by taking on the responsibility of the *mitzvot*. The celebration that we looked forward to for 13 years did not happen as

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<sup>1</sup> Feiler, Bruce. Life is in the Transitions 16

<sup>2</sup> Feiler 312

we had pictured. I know that many of you experienced this too. Perhaps it was a bar/bat mitzvah, a wedding, a funeral, a graduation, high holy day services – not how you pictured it. Still, Yael’s Bat Mitzvah was beautiful. She did a wonderful job and so many of you, along with our friends and family near and far, got to celebrate with us virtually as we zoomed the service from our Living Room. What was most impressive to me was how Yael, like all of our *b’nai mitzvah* students this year, displayed incredible resilience. She learned her Torah and Haftarah readings, led the service, shared a wonderful *D’var Torah*, and together we created a different kind of celebration. Yes, even the rabbis’ family can get caught up in talking about the party. This process reminded us of the true meaning of these important milestone moments. Community. Tradition. Family. Celebration. Creating joy - even when our expectations are forced to change. That’s being resilient. That’s finding life in the transitions.

Resilience is an essential attribute for living through transitions. What does it mean to be resilient? The Oxford dictionary defines resilience as “the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness.” But there is another understanding of resilience that I think better speaks to our moment. It comes from a woman who experienced a much more traumatic transition.

In her book the *Road to Resilience*, Sherri Mandell writes about how her son, Coby, along with his friend Yosef Ishran, were stoned to death during the Second Intifada in Israel in May 2001. Coby and Yosef were just 13 years old. Her first book, *The Blessing of a Broken Heart*, reflected on that tragedy. In this book, she shares how she and her family were able to rebuild their lives after their son’s murder. She credits resilience. Here is how she defines it: “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>

Mandell points out that a word for resilience in Hebrew is *Hosen* – which is related to the Hebrew word *Hisoon*. Anyone know what *Hisson* means? It's the Hebrew word of the year: *Hisoon* means “vaccine.” Let's make that our Hebrew word of the day. Repeat after me: *Hisoon*. Good – you really are real! The word for vaccine in Hebrew is related to the word for resilience, because vaccines help our bodies learn how to fight off illness. They also keep us, and others, safe.

Unfortunately, there is no vaccine against tragic loss. There has been a lot of that in this year of pandemic. It has impacted all of us. There is also no vaccine to cure the ills of our society, which are also on our mind this Rosh Hashanah. Over the last few years, we have been facing a transition to ever greater polarization in our country -- even when it comes to following expert advice to combat the pandemic, such as wearing masks and getting vaccinated. I am proud that we required vaccination for everyone joining us in the sanctuary today. We did this because getting vaccinated is a *mitzvah*. And if we are to be Jews of integrity then we must live our values, and our Jewish values are clear: any measures we can take to protect the health and safety of others -- we must take. That's what we have done throughout this pandemic, and what we will continue to do to make sure we bring our community together as safely as possible.

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<sup>3</sup> Mandell, Sherri The Road to Resilience: From Chaos to Celebration xiii

Now that we have all gotten our *Hisoon*, our vaccination, we need to work on our *Hosen* – our ability to be resilient in our transitions.

Fortunately, resilience runs deep within us. The Jewish people are masters of resilience. We have always been able to choose life in our transitions. What is the secret to Jewish survival? I'd like to call attention to two possibilities. The first is how we share our story. The second is our ability to respond to moments of transition with creativity and innovation.

First, telling our story. We all know the old joke that sums up every Jewish holiday: they tried to kill us, we won, let's eat! By telling and retelling our stories, we teach ourselves, and our children and grandchildren, what it means to be resilient. We will build sukkot in a couple weeks to commemorate our ancestors' difficult journey through the desert. We light Hanukkah candles to recall the Maccabees triumph over the Assyrian Greeks. On Purim we celebrate Queen Esther's victory over Haman and the Persians. On Passover we see ourselves as going from slavery to freedom, like our ancestors before us. Studies have shown that the more children know about their family's history, the stronger their sense of control over their lives and the higher their self-esteem. Hearing stories of victories and defeats provides a great measure of resilience. By telling our people's story, and by identifying ourselves within that story, we become more resilient.

Here is one modern story of resilience that really touched me. It caught my attention because parts of this story overlap with stories from my own family, as I imagine they do for many of yours as well. Leon Kopleman passed away last month at the age of 97. He was the last known surviving fighter of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Leon was born in Poland. When he was 16 the Nazis sent his family to the Warsaw Ghetto. His mother was

taken to Treblinka, and he never saw her again. Leon became active in the Jewish resistance movement, and he and his fellow fighters attacked German soldiers. In April 1943, the Nazis entered the Ghetto in full force and put down the uprising. Leon and his comrades were forced to surrender. Leon was sent to a work camp, was freed by the Polish resistance, and joined their efforts against the Germans. He was captured again, escaped, and then after the war used false identities to illegally board a ship to Israel. Once there, Leon could not yet rest. He joined the nascent Israeli army and fought in the War of Independence. Finally, when that ended, he met Hava and they were married for almost 70 years. They had three children, 9 grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren, which Kopelman would often say constituted his greatest victory over the Nazis.<sup>4</sup>

Leon Kopelman epitomized Jewish resilience. Like so many of his generation, he overcame tremendous adversity, major transitions, to help defeat the Nazis, found the state of Israel, and build a family. His story is part of our people's story. It inspires us to find life in our transitions.

Now for the second secret of Jewish survival. We have a history of responding to moments of transition with tremendous creativity and innovation. The destruction of the Second Temple brought us the innovations of the rabbis in the Midrash, Mishnah and Talmud. The expulsion from Spain led to the mysticism in Sfat. The Enlightenment brought the innovations of the Orthodox, Conservative and Reform movements. The Holocaust was followed just three years later by the birth of the State of Israel. This is what our ancestors were able to do, and their example inspires us today, as we build upon their story – our story. During this time of transition, as we gather to pray for life and reflect on

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.timesofisrael.com/last-known-surviving-fighter-of-warsaw-ghetto-uprising-dies-at-age-97/>

our lives, we recognize that we too are creating new and innovative ways for us to perpetuate our tradition. We are connecting virtually and in-person. Learning and praying together with Jews around the world. We may not yet be certain of what to write in our book of life for this year, but we know that we are not the first generation in history to face this uncertainty. The truth is, even with all of our transitions, in many ways our lives are much more certain than our ancestors. Like those who came before us, we know that if we stay true to our values, then we will be able to respond with the best story we can. Then we too can find life in our transitions.

At the end of her book, Sherri Mandell shares a story of a question she was asked in a radio interview. Listen to what she writes: “The host asked me, ‘I understand that after a loss, you have to find a new sense of normal. Is that true?’ I thought about it and then answered, ‘No...Normal isn’t enough. One has to find a new extraordinary.’”<sup>5</sup>

We too seek to find a new extraordinary. To uncover a deeper sense of self, of responsibility to others, of awareness of the role that God and our traditions play in making our lives meaningful. How will your life’s transitions bring you to a new extraordinary? Will it include more kindness, generosity, and patience? Will it mean more holy moments celebrating Shabbat and holidays? Love of Israel? Love of family? Compassion for those in need? What about it will make you proud? What about it will make your children and grandchildren proud? How will our stories help them to find resilience in their own lives? How will you find life in your transitions?

When you gather today for lunch, in person or virtually, or around the dinner table tonight, ask each other these questions. Share stories of resilience. Share how you got

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<sup>5</sup> Mandell 87

through a challenging time, and how you are getting through this time. Tell each other what the new extraordinary will look like for you. When we recall our history, tell our stories, and share our hopes and dreams, we begin to find new life in the transitions.

Hopefully next year I'll be able to reflect fully on all the lessons we've learned during this time of transition. Today, however, I do have a good sense of what will make up our new extraordinary. That's because we have already begun experiencing it. It is each of us, as part of this *kehillah kedoshah*, this holy and caring community, that will bring us into our new extraordinary. It is the resilience of the parents who prioritize their children's Jewish education, in-person and online. It is the resilience of our seniors to learn new skills and find new ways to gather safely. It is the resilience of our teachers, who make our classrooms safe and engaging environments. It is the resilience of our leaders and volunteers, who continue to give of their time and resources to move our community forward. It is the resilience of our staff, whose creativity and commitment to Jewish learning and living is unparalleled. It is your resilience, each and every one of you, in being committed to celebrating Rosh Hashanah together as a TBS Family. On screen, in-person, in the tent outside, at the stream for *Tashlikh* this afternoon. All of you are demonstrating incredible resilience in this moment of transition. All of you are finding life in the transitions, one stage, one step, one moment, at a time.

Our *Hosen* – our resilience -- is the best *hisoon* -- our best vaccine -- against the perils of the transitions we face. Our resilience in the face of transitions will allow us to create a new extraordinary, as we rededicate ourselves to our values and our community this year. Together, we can find meaning. Together, we can find joy. Together, we can find new life in the transitions. *Shanah Tovah*