The Art of Resilience: The Jewish Secret to Standing Strong

By Rabbi Judy Kummer

Shanna tovah! Happy New Year.

My friends, what a year we have been through! From the October 7 attacks and the hostage-takings, through the rise of antisemitism in the US and around the world, and through all of the political shifts and changes we have seen in our country, especially of late, we have been through a lot.

When the October 7 attacks first happened, many of us in the Jewish community were badly shaken. Our sense of safety had been shattered, as was our sense that Israel could be strong in the face of so many attacks and that it would always be there as a refuge, a safe haven for Jews around the world in case of danger.

Many of us in the American Jewish community felt triggered. We might remember exactly where we were on October 7 when we heard the awful news of what was unfolding in Israel. And we may have experienced the effects of what psychologists term "intergenerational trauma," responses to traumatic events from before we were born, where the responses have been passed down through the generations.

We see evidence of intergenerational trauma in the overfilled refrigerators and pantries some of us keep, banked against famines that are not happening now but that may have been the reality for our ancestors generations ago and in some cases oceans away. We see the impact of intergenerational trauma in the suburban American Jews leading stable safe lives who feel fearful of attack because our Eastern European Jewish ancestors

never knew when a pogrom might erupt, or when another Holocaust might begin.

The fear that clenches my heart each time I say farewell to a loved one and think “is this the last time I will see this person?” may, as a therapist would frame it, not be my own feeling; it might be an echo passed down from an earlier generation who lived with much greater insecurity than we do today.

And so, for American Jews on October 7, while the physical reality where we each were was entirely safe, many of us heard echoes of earlier traumas, and we might have identified personally with what the Israeli public was experiencing.

As many of you know, I work in a spiritual care private practice, where I provide spiritual care visits and eldercare programing, and where I officiate at lifecycle ceremonies. In the weeks and months following the October 7 attacks, I found that the elders for whom I was providing spiritual support and educational programing, who have a heightened sense of vulnerability as their baseline, needed a lot of additional spiritual support. For the Jewish elders in particular, their sense of vulnerability was even higher.

I found that I needed to explain to some of the non-Jewish residents attending these programs why it was that so many of the Jewish residents were triggered. It became clear to me that many non-Jews in the US do not know the history of antisemitism, so last fall I focused some of our educational sessions for both Jews and non-Jews on the history of antisemitism.

It also became clear that there is a way in which we Jews think of being part of a people that was unfamiliar to many of the non-Jews present at our educational programing. A brief way of framing this would be to say “when a Jew bleeds half a world

away, I feel the hurt here." A more profound way would be to note that where we in the US may experience a sense of "6 degrees of separation," with regard to Israel we may have more sense of only one or 2 degrees of separation. I personally found within 24 hours of the attack that I had two separate connections to one of the couples who had been murdered in the attack on Kibbutz B'eri. Two degrees of separation indeed.

And when these Jewish eldercare residents heard my explanations to the non-Jews present at our eldercare programs, I watched their shoulders relax; it was clear that I had given voice to some of what they were feeling, and they felt affirmed as a result.

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My friends, there has been a lot of discussion this past year about what it means to have resilience in the face of adversity.

So what is resilience? Is it a quality one either possesses or doesn't possess? Can one build resilience?

I'd like to explore together today what resilience is and look at some ways we might build a greater sense of resilience – and we'll look too at the ways that our Jewish tradition can support us in our efforts to become more resilient.

So first off, what is resilience? Psychologists define resilience as the ability to adapt well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or other significant sources of stress. Resilience is "bouncing back" from difficult experiences, much like a reed in a marsh, bending when high winds blow but not breaking or being uprooted. We will come to another image of resilience from nature in a moment.

Interestingly, when we are resilient, the challenging situations we face in life offer not only the chance of surviving a threat; they also offer opportunities for deep personal growth in the aftermath.

Harvard University psychologist George Vaillant suggests that resilience can be understood as a “twig with a fresh, green living core” that springs back and continues to grow after encountering pressure.

It’s important that we note not only what resilience is, but also what it is not: resilience is *not* about never experiencing distress or challenge. Everyone experiences challenges and distress in life. It’s in the ways that we respond to the distresses and challenges we encounter that we see if we are more or less resilient.

Another “not:” resilience is *not* a personality trait that only some people might possess. Instead, resilience involves thought patterns and behaviors, actions that most of us can learn and develop. According to the American Psychological Association resilience is ordinary, not extraordinary. That is, ordinary everyday people, like you and like me, may develop a greater sense of resilience.

Why would it be good to build emotional resilience? What’s in it for us if we do become more resilient?
One mental health professional I know says that resilience is “the secret sauce to navigating this unpredictable journey called life.” Resilience is like a safety net, catching us when we fall. And it's the art of transforming challenges into growth opportunities.

What are some of the benefits to increasing our sense of resilience? We may experience improved mental and emotional health. We may also build stronger relationships, and our mental

acuity may even increase; we may be more able to solve the problems we inevitably face in life.

So it turns out that there are lots of wonderful reasons that we might want to build resilience.

And then we might ask, what does it take to build resilience? Unless we are thrown in to a situation not of our own choosing, we have to be intentional about it. Being patient can also make a difference, because it can take time and effort and some flexibility to develop resilience.

There are different models for building resilience. I'd like to focus on one model which suggests there are four 4 core components to building resilience: **connection, wellness, healthy thinking** and **meaning or purpose.**

Let's address each of these components individually and also look together at some parallel Jewish teachings.

We start out with **building connections**.

There is a reality that when any animal is wounded, a first instinct is to isolate, to minimize the chances for further trauma and to go off and lick one's wounds on one's own. On a very basic level, we human beings are animals, and for many of us, after something terrible happens, we have an innate instinct to isolate ourselves.

But the challenge is that isolation may actually not be beneficial for us. Study after study has shown that isolation brings with it decline.

Connecting with others can be a balm for the soul. It can help remind us that we are not alone in facing our difficulties. I am convinced that one of many reasons our Jewish tradition prescribes that we say the Kaddish for the first 11 months following a death is precisely to counter the human instinct to withdraw when we feel pain. Where we human animals might be inclined to pull away, this ritual encourages us to gather with others and be comforted by their presence -- which can help carry us through a time we might have thought we would not be able to survive.

And remarkably, having our hearts feel not so alone in challenging times can actually change our body chemistry. There is some evidence that when two heart cells are placed in a petri dish together, before long they will be beating in consonance – and we know that having company during challenging times can bring down blood pressure (depending of course on the company ☺), and it can lead to an overall sense of well-being.

What does our Jewish tradition teach on the importance of community and connection? We're not in this alone. The Talmud teaches that *"Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh"*—all members of the Jewish people are responsible for one another. It really is ok that we lean on our community, sharing both our burdens and our joys. Sometimes, just knowing that others are there for us makes all the difference…

And when we establish a connection with others, not only are they able to be there for us, but it allows us to be there for them when they will need. Being part of a web of connection like this can actually help to build our resilience!

I will encourage you: join a group, follow an interest that connects you with others, come to some of our BCCJGC monthly zoom programs, go on a date night with your significant other or spend

time with family or friends or even with your pet – help someone else -- and it may very well make it easier for you to bounce back better the next time adversity will strike.

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The next item on the list for how to build resilience is **wellness**. It is of paramount importance that we take good care of ourselves. It turns out that resilience isn't just about finding emotional strength to get through a tough time. It's predicated on physical and emotional well-being. And our Jewish tradition agrees with this idea!

Judaism views the human body as a precious gift from God that we are to nurture and protect. The body is the home of the soul, a spark of holiness living within us, and we are entrusted with these gifts of body and soul with instruction to care well for them.

It's important that we tend well to our bodies, getting proper nutrition and exercise and rest. It's important too that we make time for the things that bring us joy in life, things that replenish our emotional and spiritual wells. It can be difficult to be resilient when we are running on empty!

And tending to our souls on a regular basis is also an important part of the wellness practices that help us become more resilient. Connect with others from our religious tradition. Practice mindfulness. Establish a gratitude practice, journal, meditate, do some yoga – all of these different options can help us remain healthy and can boost our resilience.

So we've covered **building connections** and **tending to our well-being.** A third key component in building resilience is to **embrace healthy thinking** – – and a fourth is choosing to **find a purpose.** It's empowering to have a clear goal and to hold onto it.

At any moment in our lives, we may not have choice about what is going on in our lives and what hand has been dealt us. But we *do* have control over how we respond. We can choose to focus on what isn't going well or on the pain we may feel as a result. Alternatively, we can choose to focus on what is good. And as we cultivate an inclination to focus on what is good, our resilience gets stronger.

I think of the psychiatrist and philosopher Victor Frankel who wrote a pivotal work on his experiences living through the Holocaust and how it changed his whole way of thinking. While Victor Frankl was in the concentration camps, he didn't have control over what was going on in his life or what would happen to him -- but he realized that he did have control over how he responded. He came to the conclusion that the only thing that would keep him alive would be to have meaning and a sense of purpose, a goal in his life. He chose to focus on staying alive so he could find his wife and be of help to her after the war. His choice to hold onto that sense of purpose helped him survive the nightmare of being in the camps.

In addition to choosing how we will respond, another element of embracing healthy thinking is to keep things in perspective and to remain oriented to the present moment. For those of us who felt at all triggered on October 7 and possibly since then, we need to remind ourselves that even while we are feeling the pain of others who are suffering, we ourselves are physically safe in the moment.

And we need to remember that while we may have experienced trauma in the past, it does not dictate that this will be the case in future.

As we work to build resilience, we can think about the power of remaining hopeful, or of working to find hope in the face of

despair. I am sure I'm not the only person here who is the descendent of immigrants who came to the US in the last century with more hope than money in their pockets.

I think of my Grandpa Joe, my father's father, one of eight siblings, with only about an elementary school education, who against all odds made it from Czechoslovakia to the US as a teenager. How on earth did he learn an entirely new language and build a business from scratch that would not only support his family, but would allow both of his sons to graduate from college and attend graduate schools and make their way in the world as professionals? He had hope, and he had resilience.

Resilience and hope can propel us to do powerful things in life, and they can support us even in the darkest of times.

Our Jewish tradition has a lot to say about hope, *tikvah*.
It is no accident that our Israeli national anthem is called *Hatikvah*, the hope. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, the late chief rabbi of England wrote a wonderful book called "Future Tense: How the Jews Invented Hope." In it, he wrote, "to be a Jew is to be an agent of hope in a world serially threatened by despair. Every ritual, every mitzvah, every syllable of the Jewish story, every element of Jewish law, is a protest against escapism, resignation or the blind acceptance of fate. Judaism is a sustained struggle, the greatest ever known, against the world that is, in the name of the world that could be, [that] should be, but is not yet."

We can ask, what can we do to bring that world that should be into existence? And what can we do to bring more hope and more resilience into the world, and into our own lives?

This year I was gifted an extraordinary book called "the Amen Effect" by Rabbi Sharon Brous. As Rabbi Brous writes, "we cannot ensure long life, but we *can* find meaning, purpose, and

celebration in the life we have. Though we cannot live forever, we can choose to make a life worth living."

My friends, the power to become ever more resilient is in our own hands. We each have some agency over this. Especially in these challenging times, may we work to become more and more connected with each other and with our communities; may we engage wholeheartedly in wellness efforts, becoming as physically and spiritually healthy as we can; may we focus on healthy thinking and gratitude and hope, and may we work to bring meaning into our own lives and into the lives of others.

May all of our efforts be blessed. And let us say Amen.