Pesach Reflection on the Responsibility of Being a Resilient People

Miriam Silman, Shabbat April 2, 2021

This week of Pesach in many ways epitomizes, and anchors, much of our identity as Jews: as a uniquely and resoundingly resilient people. Nowhere is that clearer than in the Pesach Maggid: we Jews are repeatedly oppressed, discriminated against, enslaved and traumatized, and through dint of persistence, grit, faith and the literal grace of God, we are resilient enough to survive – and even recognize and empathize with the suffering our survival inflicts on others. This narrative of oppression and resilience is not unique to Pesach as we know.

My interest in this topic comes from more than 30 years of immersion in the world of trauma and resilience, as a clinician, a researcher, and educator. This year, of course, has elevated attention to and about both trauma and resilience in ways I could not have imagined. As we adjust to a new phase of pandemic life, and continuing to reckon with the reality of systemic racism, I'm both gratified by public recognition of how trauma and resilience shape our lives individually and collectively, and I worry about how trauma and resilience have become part of the everyday lexicon. This interest in and concern about how we view resilience is in no small part connected to my Jewishness, or more precisely, the way resilience is couched in our Jewish history, texts and lore. So let's start there – with the understanding that I am by no means a scholar of Jewish learning, but that is actually a part of what makes this particularly relevant in this moment.

At the most global level, we have our narrative of being the chosen people. As a child, it seemed to me we had been chosen for an awful lot of grief and loss, with no end in sight for hardship as the focus of our identity (my Jewish education was bookmarked by the traumas of the Six Day and Yom Kippur Wars, followed by a healthy dose of the plight of Soviet Jewry). But, as we all know, the story doesn't end with the hardships: we always survive, demonstrating enormous resilience over and over. Which begs the first of many questions: Are we resilient because we are chosen? Or chosen because we are resilient?

Either answer is problematic, for both depict resilience as being somehow deserved – we deserve to be resilient enough to survive, whether the choosing or the resilience comes first. Which leaves a gaping hole when we dare to ask about all those others, the "unchosen". More about that later.

The scientist in me knows how wrong-headed this depiction of resilience is. The evidence is clear: resilience is not trait – something inherent or endowed upon us – but a state of being. And, states of being can be created with knowledge and skill. Resilience, it turns out, can, like many things, be built, nurtured and supported. We know clearly what builds resilience in children: family attachment, peer support, school connection, a sense of competence, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and, yes, spirituality in the broadest sense. We know that even if we miss out on those critical building blocks as children, we can take steps to fill in the gaps later in life, by strengthening our "resilience muscle" with practice, much the way we train for marathons or triathlons. And, we now understand that as a state (not a trait), resilience is dynamic – it waxes and wanes across our lifespan, and even across different parts of our life. We can be resilient at work, or school, and not so much at home; we can be resilient in our professional role, highly fragile in our romantic one. While resilient children are likely to experience resilience as adults, biology, mental health, addiction, and life experience can alter that significantly. In general, resilient parents are more likely to create resilient children, and resilient communities are more likely to create resilient individuals, but we know that there are no hard and fast rules. And, above all, it's clear that there are many more people and peoples besides Jews who have characteristics of resilience.

Yet as Jews, we assume our resilience is one part of being chosen. In fact, throughout the Torah we are reminded that God tests the righteous, not the wicked, and perhaps even more troubling, the strong, not the weak. Yet we know others who are subjected to inordinate suffering without the benefit of strength – in fact, we make it part of our Godly mission to assist them as part of *tikkun olom*, literally providing those very building blocks of resilience.

And this is where, for me, it gets really gnarly: I'm not sure that we are actually so resilient. Here's why: resilience can only occur as a response to trauma or adversity. In their absence,

success or flourishing, or even survival, isn't resilience, it's only good fortune. So, how do we square this concept of ourselves as a resilient people when, perhaps we are starting out with the assets of strength? After all, God has chosen us, apparently for our righteousness. And, in many ways, we've actually had it pretty good. (Before going further, I do need to note that in no way do I diminish the horror or the trauma of the Holocaust, but hear me out on what I mean.) Our traumas, through the ages, have come far enough apart to allow us to rebuild strength, sparing us the ravages of unrelenting adversity that eats away at a people, generation upon generation, body and soul. For thousands of years we have prospered between our moments of adversity and trauma, and so when we return to baseline, we are still on a positive trajectory. We have found ways to not only fit in, but to actually define some of what it means to fit in across the arc of history, and yet to always retain our uniqueness. This, we surmise, is the evidence of our resilience, the reward for our faith, our righteousness.

In fact, sometimes in our Jewish narrative, not only do we survive, but our resilience is transcendent: we are stronger or better for having survived. Once again, my scientist brain as well as my humanistic heart, are troubled: we know that actually, not all of us do survive, and those that do, aren't necessarily stronger. Sometimes we see those cracks clearly, other times they remain hidden. We now understand that the effects of trauma are enduring in our bodies as well as our brains, as trauma researcher Bessel Van Der Kolk so aptly says with his book title, *The Body Keeps the Score.* The new science of epigenetics, explains that the experience of trauma can actually alter the way our genes are expressed by altering our telomeres, the structures at the end of our chromosomes, changes in gene expression for generations to come. In fact, our understanding of the psychological phenomenon of inherited historical trauma originated from studies of the children of holocaust survivors. What we now understand is that these effects do not have to be permanent – this where the science of resilience matters. Epigenetics reminds us that it is not our DNA that changes, but the opportunity for elements of our DNA to be turned on or off – healing our telomeres is possible, it turns out, but it takes intentional and persistent effort. Ironically, I think Jews have taken these discoveries and interpreted them as additional evidence of our inherent resilience – that even with those added risks, we naturally seem to persevere and even flourish.

But resilience is not transcendence. Resilience does not require post-traumatic growth, finding the silver lining, or gaining strength. The dictionary definition of resilience limits it to the idea of bouncing back, elasticity, and returning to one's pre-crisis state. The American Psychological Association define resilience as "the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress". Researcher Ann Mastin describes it as "ordinary magic", a potential we all possess if provided with the right nutrients. Those added insights, moments of growth and self-actualization – that's extra, icing on the cake, so to speak.

Now you may be thinking, okay, Miriam, you've made your point, academic arguments about the semantics of the word. So what? And here's where I think it matters.

Resilience is the new buzz word. We use it broadly, and at times indiscriminately. I was concerned about this before March, 2020. I am more concerned now. And, we have to be careful -- resilience misapplied, I believe, has the potential to harm. Here's what worries me.

First, the problem of conflating of resilience and strength. As the daughter of a structural engineer I was schooled early on to understand resilience as the critical balance of elasticity and strength – with the recognition that too much of one or the other could lead to collapse. The confusion of resilience as strength is particularly noxious in the American capitalism conceptualization of lack of strength as fatal flaw. Not feeling resilient at any given moment in time should neither be equated to weakness, not preclude the ability to be resilient (in fact, there are plenty of survival stories that occur in the context of intense weakness). We must start to understand and talk about resilience as a dynamic state, one that balances strength and flexibility, the way bridges, palm trees and skyscrapers weather high winds. At times we need more strength than flexibility, at others more flexibility than strength. And, we must allow for changes in resilience over time, making the muscle analogy apt in some ways: there are times we are in great shape, and times we are a bit softer; in part the result of what we do or don't do (working out), in part the result of factors beyond our control (illness, injury, aging, growth spurts), or in part conscious choice to take on stress or adversity at different times (grad school, pregnancy, caretaking, relationships, etc.).

Which brings me to the second hazard: Our identity as a resilient people makes owning anything less than resilience problematic. If, as Jews, we are somehow expected to be able to withstand and survive tremendous adversity, and especially if that ability is connected to righteousness, then we may be loathe to admit when we need help, and drive help-seeking underground. Again, science tell us that help-seeking is a critical component of recovery and healing. I think particularly of our young people who are just learning to navigate the ups and downs of life, and who, upon hearing story upon story about seemingly automatic resilience of their Jewish ancestors, jump to the conclusion that they can never achieve anything close to resilience, and suffer in silence, sometimes with dire consequences. We Jews can learn from the Japanese tradition of Kintsugi, the filling of cracks in pottery with gold dust in lacquer – to honor the repair and healing rather than hiding it away.

In fact, as Rabbi Wirtschafter and I were discussing my struggles with resilience, he pointed me to a few passages surrounding our Pesach Exodus story that acknowledge that we must not only lean in to, but express and share, pain and suffering. In Exodus 2.23, we are told that after the death of the King of Egypt, "The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out….God heard their moaning, and God remembered [the] covenant with Abraham Isaac and Jacob. And God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them", or in another translation, "God saw the children of Israel". Even our all-knowing God, our very creator, needs a reminder that we humans need help, needs to see and her our pain. A few verses later, that help is provided, when in Exodus 3.7, God's decision to assist the enslaved Jews through Moses is again tied to expression of pain: God says, "I have surely seen the affliction of My people in Egypt, and have heard their cry…. for I know their pains…" or in another translation "I am mindful of their sufferings". Just as there is no resilience without trauma, there is no resilince-building without expression and sharing of suffering.

But, again, this is not without problems, which brings me to my third concern: Resilience does not only visit the deserving. Everyone deserves resilience. Period. How ironic that for all the humanism I associate with Judaism, this way of thinking about resilience seems devoid of equity. Now on the surface this seems obvious, and easily rectified. But, it may be more

complex. In fact, perhaps the whole concept of resilience is problematic for those who have not had a break from relentless oppression. As I noted earlier, we Jews have enjoyed relatively long periods of prosperity throughout our history. But respite is part of privilege, particularly White privilege. In the context of 400 years of relentless racism against people who are Black and Brown, consider this headline, "Don't call me resilient, it covers up systemic racism". As the author, Vinita Srivastava says in her piece,

> "In other words, we may not be able to fix it, we may not be able to stop it, but we can celebrate the resilience of the communities that continue to get through it….But continuously asking whole communities to be resilient in the face of police violence, land theft, lack of healthcare and job security, can cover up many things…"

Are there some traumas that, in fact, are so horrific, we should not try to manage them with resilience, but instead acknowledge they are too big, too damaging, to expect to return to our previous functioning? Or, do we need to be reminded that the state of previous functioning is, in fact, not desirable either, simply not good enough, not human enough? As we recognize the implications of intersectionality to see the compounding and cumulative traumas our multiple identities can create, we must attend to the potential negative impact of relentlessly promoting resilience, its risk of being used as an instrument of suppression to enhance systemic and structural inequity and oppression. Are there times when resilience is actually not appropriate, and resistance is necessary? In fact, again, our Pesach Maggid in instructive: After years of oppressive enslavement that culminated in even greater trauma, we did not immediately move into resilience. First, we resisted, even knowingly inflicting great harm and trauma on others. And only then, having faced additional threat, and tremendous risk, do we move into resilience – 40 years-worth, in fact. And, as we examine our other classic stories of triumph and resilience across our Jewish history, this theme of resistance is not infrequent, despite our privileging of resilience as the dominant narrative theme.

This raises my fourth concern, this issue of meaning-making and resilience: We clearly have chosen to find the meaning in our conceptualization of resilience, and grounded in

righteousness, and a source of strength. But this may not be a constructive frame despite understanding that meaning-making is critical for resilience-building: Even children have to feel that being alive means something, and as adults we are conscious that finding meaning is part of how we survive. And yet, we have assumed that meaning-making must apply to the trauma itself, and this has fortified the notion that resilience must incorporate growth and reveal silver linings.

Thirty years of bearing witness to all manner of trauma by persons old and young, male and female, black, brown and white, rich and poor, has made me certain that is not the case. Sometimes, there is absolutely no meaning in what has happened, we just have to accept that terrible things do happen for no reason. It is not a test of our strength, our faith, or our righteousness. But this does not mean we abandon meaning-making, just that we redirect it – meaning-making can promote resilience without emanating from the trauma itself. Meaning-making can, and often should, root itself firmly in the present. To tie resilience to finding meaning in our trauma, can leave us get stuck in the negative impact of the trauma itself, thwarting that very survival, the "getting through" we seek and need.

Pesach is replete with fours, but I am going to risk positing a fifth and final concern: Although we have promoted a story of collective resilience as a Jewish people, and although empirical data clearly tells us that root causes and community context are powerful predictors of not only trauma, but also resilience, we persist in framing resilience as an individually controlled state. Although we talk about resilience as a collective descriptor, our insistence on its connection to righteousness takes it to the individual level. And, if resilience is tied to righteousness, this oft-referenced line from Proverbs (24.16) is telling: "For a righteous person can fall seven times and rise" (of course, we note that the original translation of righteous "man" opens a whole other conversation around who is and deserves to be resilient, but we'll leave that for another day). The current self-help movement has seized upon this concept of resilience as grit, as the path to health and wellness, positive leadership, innovation and creativity, and hope. I fear this imparts disproportionate influence and power to the concept, and diverts it from simply adapting for survival to transcendence. But what I fear most is placing the burden of resilience-

building on the individual. Again, although we understand the science of promoting resilience, these strategies will only succeed amidst resilience-promoting climates and environments. Even the best seeds and the best soil will fail to support a plant without sunlight and rain. Resilience is our collective responsibility not our collective honor: no matter how much we know about the building blocks of resilience across the lifespan, no matter how strong, or righteous, or deserving we are, or think we are, resilience demands care for all people, all creatures, all plants, all planets.

So, I challenge us all to reconsider what it means to be a resilient people: Our resilience cannot just be because our Torah tells us it is so. Our resilience is not evidenced by the numerous traumas and adversities we have endured. Our resilience is not because we are chosen, or righteous or strong by dint of good fortune or genes. Our resilience is because we embark in an ongoing collective care for one another, within and beyond our tribe, and find some meaning to our human lives in that collective care. If we accept that is what makes us resilient, I ask that we embark on a careful examination and awareness of how we use the words resilience and resilient, how we think about the power of the relationships we develop and hold, and how we assume responsibility for the actions we take and the communities we create.

This is especially important in this particular moment of healing and recovery. As we support one another to build resilience, we should be particularly mindful of how we do this for our children and for those among us who face additional struggles individually or in community. We must be careful to remember that resilience comes and goes, that environmental care and support matter, that we can intentionally support its growth. We should also be cautious of unrealistic expectations, and be satisfied by survival, not disappointed by a lack of transcendence. We must see healing, recovery and resilience as community endeavors, held by the connections between us and not built upon stoic individualism. And, we must normalize the need to acknowledge, and express pain and suffering as critical to soliciting the healing responses that can promote resilience.

We are only truly a resilient people if we recognize our responsibility to ensure resilience for others, and not just our good fortune at having survived so far. It is this strong humanistic

tradition of care and stewardship, our mantra of *tikkun olom*, the repair of the world, that I hope is what makes us truly a resilient people.

Shabbat Shalom,