

**Erev Rosh HaShanah 5783**  
**September 25, 2022**  
**Delivered at Temple Emanu-El Atlanta**  
**by Rabbi Rachael Klein Miller**

*A Toolkit for Spiritual Resilience*

Shana Tova!

When our daughter, Zohara was about 10 months old, like most kids her age, she fell down a lot. She wasn't quick to cry. Instead, after falling she would lay there for a few moments, honestly, a few moments longer than we expected, but we just sat back and observed. After it happened a couple of times we started to realize what was happening. It appeared that she was completing a quick self scan.

Am I okay? I think so. Does anything hurt? ...Toes? Good. Knees? Fine. Elbows? Still there. Head? Still attached. And then she would get up and be on her way. She wouldn't make a peep.

We learn from Proverbs that a righteous person falls down seven times — and gets up.<sup>1</sup> In this ever-changing world, we need the next Jewish generation to be ready to persist, to rise up after they fall, to be resilient about their resiliency. Zo has been an inspiration to me and many others in this regard.

In the collective trauma of the past two and a half years of “covid-times” we have all learned that we can never be certain when difficult moments will strike. We can only be certain that they inevitably will. The need for resilience is great, and I would argue that the need for spiritual resilience is even greater. If resilience is: “the capacity to recover from difficulties and adversity,” then spiritual resilience is “the ability to sustain one’s sense of self and purpose through a set of beliefs...while encountering that adversity.” Put differently, spiritual resilience is the ability to get back up not just because we *know* it’s what we should try to do, but because our beliefs, morals, values, and sense of self propel us to get back up. The problem is, where does one learn the tools necessary for such a spiritual resilience?

Tonight, I offer the solution for building our toolkit of spiritual resilience.

[Bring out empty toolkit]

I’m not sure there is another people who get up after they are down quite like the Jewish people. I know this because we are here today. We are the next link in the chain of tradition dating back to the words of our sacred Torah. We are connected to a land that was once ours, land that we were repeatedly kicked out from, yet continually

---

<sup>1</sup> Proverbs 24:16

prayed for a return to! And today, the State of Israel exists in all her wonder and all of her complexities. The foundation of our spiritual resilience has to do with our connection to the land of Israel.

For example, every Passover, we've prayed, "Next Year in Jerusalem." Every evening, when we have the chance to recite words of our prayer Hashkiveinu, we have prayed that God spread over Jerusalem a shelter of peace. During our Torah service, we call out, "*Av Harachamim heitivah virzonecha et tzion tivneh chomot Yerushalayim. Source of mercy: favor Zion with your goodness; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and Ki mitzyion teitzei Torah u'dvar Adonai miYrushalayim: For from out of Zion will come the Torah and the word of God from Jerusalem.*" These are resilient connections to our sacred land that we have declared for over a thousand years.

The existence of the Jewish people today is grounded in a spiritual resilience that spans from the Israelite of over three thousand years ago to the Israeli of today. Take for example our biblical patriarch, Jacob. He is truly the embodiment of our Proverb, "a righteous person falls down seven times – and gets up." After the big fight with his brother Esau over who would inherit their father's blessing and birthright, Jacob journeys from his home in Be'er Sheva toward the land of his grandfather Abraham, in Haran. One evening on this trip he lays down to sleep and has the famous dream we know today as "Jacob's Ladder." During this dream he sees angels going up and down the ladder and he sees God standing beside him. God tells Jacob that the land he is on will be for him and his descendants. Jacob then wakes up from his dream and proclaims,

"אֲכַן יְשׁ יְהוָה בַּמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה וְאֲנֹכִי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי:" "Surely God is present in this place, and I did not know. In awe, the text says, he continues, "מִהֲנֹרָא הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה" How AWESOME is this place. This is none other than the house of God and that is the gateway to heaven.<sup>2</sup> This moment was necessary for the awakening of the spiritual resilience that would accompany Jacob throughout his life.

We can try to imagine the majesty that Jacob saw both in his dream and when he woke up. We can look at pictures all we want, but until we're in a physical space, taking in the scenery for ourselves, we cannot know how life changing a particular place in will be.

We need to go to Israel.

To have a God-filled, awe-inspiring experience that grounds us in our Jewish identity and in our sacred land, we must be physically there. In Israel we can have the awe-filled moments that build spiritual resiliency by connecting us to something so much bigger than ourselves. Encounters with God, in the holy land, will give us awe and build our spiritual resilience.

---

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 28:16 and 17

The awe filled moments don't just "happen." We often spend a little too much time talking about, "the Kotel, the Wailing Wall, the Western Wall, it was the most amazing experience ever!" Perhaps an unpopular opinion, my "מה-נורא המקום הזה" How-AWESOME-is-this-place-moment didn't and still doesn't happen at the Kotel. Instead, my experience was more like Jacob. My "מה-נורא המקום הזה" How-AWESOME-is-this-place-moment occurred much closer to where Jacob had his.

While on a Birthright trip, my first-time experiencing Israel, they drove us out into the desert without another light or human in sight. It was the night before we hiked Masada — the famous location of Jewish heroism and resilience. Being near Masada we likely weren't so far off the very path Jacob may have taken when traveling from Be'er Sheva to Haran. It was a crisp, December night. I could see every star in the sky for the first time in my life, and I grew up in Kansas, so I'd seen a decent night's sky before. But here, in the middle of the desert, I was gazing up at the same sky our ancestors had gazed upon thousands of years ago. I did not know just how "awe" inspiring Israel would be until I felt the holiness just like Jacob. Such a moment would become the foundation for my spiritual resilience because seeing the night's sky in the holy land connected me to something so much bigger than myself: To God, to our ancestors, and to the Jewish people of the present day.

For some, that holiness, that How-AWESOME-is-this-place-moment *will* happen at the Kotel. For others it will be at the edge of the Mediterranean Sea, in the busyness of shuk Machane Yehudah - the open air market in Jerusalem, on top of Masada, or perhaps while stargazing in the desert.

*After* Jacob's How-AWESOME-is-this-place-moment he went on to become the father of our 12 tribes and renamed Yisrael, which literally means, "one who struggles with God." He faced adversity growing up as his father's unloved son, in fighting with his brother, Esau, in wrestling with the angel and surviving, and in dealing with the perceived loss of his favorite son and then more children. Many of us would turn to the story of Jacob wrestling the angel as THE example of spiritual resilience that we should embody. However, that moment would not hold its spiritual weight if it was not first preceded by his dream with the ladder. Catapulted by a singular moment of awe, one captured in the desert of the holy land, Jacob's resilience found its foundation. Then, each act that followed remain models for us today to take strength from a moment filled with awe and use it as a tool of resilience when we face adversity. After all, a righteous person falls down seven times — and gets up.

I ask that you now take a moment to place Jacob, the Israel of the Israelites in the time of the Torah, into your Toolkit for Spiritual Resilience. In doing so we capture his openness to embrace an awe-filled spiritual moment of awakening as the foundation for finding spiritual strength for the rest of his life.

Then there are the Israelis of today, many of whom have lived through wars and conflict, but especially through the Second Intifada — a recent part of Israeli history that far too many people seem to have forgotten. From around 2000 to 2005, Israelis lived under the constant threat of terrorism, and yet life persisted. Living life under terror was and continues to be an act of physical and spiritual resilience. Israelis living out their day to day represents their belief that things *will* get better, that our ancestors persevered in generations past and so, *am Yisrael chai*, the Jewish people continue to live.

Back in the early 2000s, the terrorism was not the terrorism of rockets, where shelter could be found beneath Iron Dome or a nearby bomb shelter. Rather, this terrorism was the result of random suicide bombings, and backpacks left behind with the intent of causing death and terror. Let me remind you of the spiritual resilience of the standard Israeli during the Second Intifada.

The Israeli of the Second Intifada, especially in Jerusalem woke up, each morning anxious. In the words of a Jerusalemite friend, “No one knew where and when the next bombing [would be.] Would their children be safe, their loved ones, their fellow Israelis? Should they take a bus, eat in a restaurant, go grocery shopping?

Yet they went about their day to day. Some stopped taking the bus. Some didn’t go to cafes anymore, but many continued. They still went to the grocery store, to the mall, and on walks in the neighborhood, but they did so with a lot more caution. Many took their meals to go rather than sit in the restaurants and cafes to dine. Those who continued to take public transportation scrutinized each individual on the bus, trying to judge if they could have an explosive belt under their clothes. One story I read noted, “But after a while, I realized that if they wanted to blow themselves up, I probably wouldn't be able to get off the bus in time. So I would just keep reading my book. I figured that if I was going to get blown up, I might as well finish reading another page first.”

To an outsider, life went on almost as normal. But inside Israeli homes, parents hugged and kissed their children in the morning wondering if they would see them again. Many Israelis found that they were repeatedly in close proximity to terror attacks. Every Israeli knew someone who died in an attack. Yet through it all, they continued, they were resilient about their resiliency. Bombing sites were cleaned rather quickly. Funerals sometimes held the same day. Then the society pushed forward. They refused to let terror win because every person who stayed did so out of a deep connection to their home. Their resilience was bolstered by their mutual concern and connection.

I ask that you now take a moment to place the Israeli of the Second Intifada, the 21st century Israeli, into your Toolkit for Spiritual Resilience. In doing so we capture the spiritual resilience of the modern Israeli who believed and continues to believe in the Zionist vision of a right to self-determination in our sacred homeland. Israelis will not be deterred by outside threats. Their resilience allows us to continue to call Israel a home for the Jewish people.

To go to Israel is to see resiliency anthropomorphized — it is to see resiliency in human form. Since Rabbi Spike arrived in 2015, we have been taking congregational trips to Israel for many summers with adult-only and family buses.

However, this coming summer, thanks to the generosity of one of our congregants, Edwin Schiffer, we begin a new journey. In June 2023, and every other year after that, teens who complete our confirmation academy will be eligible to go on a highly subsidized ten-day trip with their Temple Emanu-El classmates and rabbis as a part of the Schiffer Family Teen Israel Trip. In the “even” years, we plan to continue our summer trips as we take more of our congregants to Israel – maybe you’ll be the one to join us in 2024.

The effectiveness of building spiritual resiliency through travel and experiential learning is unmatched. The future of the Jewish community and Jewish resiliency is dependent upon continued engagement from our youth. With Israel as our classroom, a country quite literally built by spiritual resilience, we have the opportunity to make a lifelong impact.

For many of our families, this trip would not otherwise be possible for their teenager. Our teens will continue to engage with their synagogue, with their Jewish identity, with their Jewish peers, as they grow and expand their toolkit for spiritual resilience. I have witnessed first-hand what happens when a community doubles down on finding spiritual resilience in Israel. Cincinnati, Ohio is the place where they have proven this theory through communal teen trips. Studies of the program have shown that teens who travel to Israel have higher levels of Jewish commitment in the long term, AND, in the short-term there is increased engagement from the entire family. Ultimately, these teens develop into adults who are connected to and invested in their culture, faith, and community on a much deeper level.<sup>3</sup>

Our Confirmation teens here at Temple Emanu-El will, through their experience, develop their beliefs, morals, and values. They will develop a deeper sense of self. The combination of these spiritual tools will give them the strength, the resilience, to face the adversity that lies ahead, whenever it may strike. They will be part of a continued line of resilient Jews who are committed to their identity, their Temple Emanu-El community, and Israel.

I ask that you now take a moment to place the Temple Emanu-El Israel travelers into your Toolkit for Spiritual Resilience, for they have seen or will come to understand spiritual resiliency in a way understood only through travel to Israel. In doing so we capture the memories, strength, and longing to continue to pursue our Jewish identity and sense of self in the face of adversity.

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cincyjourneys.org/blog-cincy-journeys/summers-israel-travel-enhances-jewish-identity-for-135-young-adults>

Our Toolkit for Spiritual Resilience has grown. In one pocket sits the spiritual resilience of Jacob, who teaches us the empowerment of finding our *הַיְיָ הַמְּקוֹם הַזֶּה*-moment, our How-AWESOME-is-this-place-moment *in* the land of Israel.

In another pocket sits the spiritual resilience of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Israeli. When we learn about the history of the Second Intifada, we find strength in knowing that our Israeli siblings remained resilient in their commitment to the people, the land, and the state — they did not let terror win. Knowing our *ירוּשָׁה*: our spiritual or Jewish inheritance empowers our future resilience.

In the final pocket sits the spiritual resilience gained by traveling to Israel. Only through travel to Israel can we have our Jacob moment. Only through travel to Israel can we see the resilience of the Jewish-Israeli today, in real time.

May we empower the current and future generations of Temple Emanu-El to be resilient about their resiliency, to travel to Israel, and to strengthen one another.

As they say...next year, in Jerusalem. I hope you'll join me.

Shana Tova.