



“WHAT DOESN'T KILL YOU MAKES YOU STRONGER”

As the great modern-day philosopher Kelly Clarkson once opined, “What doesn't kill you makes you stronger.” Of course, she didn't coin the phrase - the credit for that is generally given to the actual philosopher Frederick Nietzsche.

This year has been awful. I have heard from so many of you, and I have felt it myself - unnerved, frightened, knocked off balance by so many upheavals - upheavals of weather with wildfires and hurricanes, upheavals in government structures we rely upon, upheaval in our assumed social contracts about what is acceptable to say - the racism, misogyny, homophobia, and anti-Semitism blatantly expressed - spawning not just more hate speech, but more hate-driven violence than the watchdog organization Southern Poverty Law Center has recorded in decades. And that is to say nothing of whatever difficulties any of us experienced in our personal spheres - deaths of loved ones, illness, addiction, divorce, or job loss.

So what do we do when confronted with this much awful? One choice is to fall apart and cry. That's not a terrible immediate response. And really, if we skip that part, it's probably going to come back and bite us. Another is to shut out the awful, pretend that none of it is happening...but that will probably net similar results. Then what? Then, we need to be resilient.

After an initial expression of grief - what doesn't kill us makes us stronger. The ability to bounce back and to somehow keep moving forward even through tragedy and devastation - that is called resilience. We know what it looks like when we see it in other people, but when the awful stuff happens, we often don't believe that WE could be those people, that we could actually come through the awful of life better, stronger, more able than we were before. We believe, incorrectly as it turns out, that some people are born with resilience and the rest of us are out of luck. A huge body of research has shown that while some people may be born with it, resilience is not only an innate quality. It is a skill that can be learned, a muscle that can be strengthened at any stage of life.

Recently, a rabbi friend told me to read Sheryl Sandberg's Option B. Sandberg, chief operating officer at Facebook, was on vacation with her husband when he suffered a heart attack and died leaving her a young widow with two children. Option B, the only option left when the one she truly desired wasn't possible, is her story about reclaiming life after tragedy. Written with psychologist, top-rated Wharton professor and friend, Adam Grant, it is about resilience. This book is incredibly rich and I encourage you to read it because I'm going to barely scratch its surface today.

Sandberg writes: “We all deal with loss: jobs lost, loves lost, lives lost. The question is not whether these things will happen. They will, and we will have to face them.”

Resilience comes from deep within us and from support outside us. It comes from gratitude for what's good in our lives and from [her words] leaning in to the suck. It comes from analyzing how we process grief and from simply accepting that grief. Sometimes

we have less control than we think. Other times we have more.

I learned that when life pulls you under, you can kick against the bottom, break the surface, and breathe again.”

The question remains - how? What doesn't kill us makes stronger sounds nice but doesn't include instructions.

One of my favorite inspirers and teachers of recent years is social scientist Brene Brown. She teaches that when we don't have the internal strength to deal with life's struggles, thinking about someone who did or does can inspire us to do the same. Brown says “In these uncertain and risky moments of vulnerability, I search for inspiration from the brave innovators and disruptors whose courage feels contagious. I read and watch everything by them or about them that I can my hands on - every interview, every essay, every lecture, every book. I do this so that when I need them, when I'm living in my fear, they come to sit with me and cheer me on.” Brown's personal inspirations include JK Rowling, bell hooks, and Ken Burns. She writes, “But my oldest and most steadfast counselor is Maya Angelou. I was introduced to her work 32 years ago when I was studying poetry in college. I read her poem, “Still I Rise,” and everything shifted for me. It contained such power and beauty.”

The person who comes to sit with me as I struggle, especially through finding a way to be your rabbi when the challenges in our world feel overwhelming and insurmountable, pushing me always to help you address the world's injustice, is my mentor, Rabbi Lynne Landsberg. Lynne was a powerhouse of a rabbi when I was just a kid in her youth group, before a car accident nearly ended her life 20 years ago. Since then, Lynne has been resilient in ways that constantly amaze and inspire me. She has lived with a traumatic brain injury that diminished but did not extinguish her vision, her ability to walk, her strength, her speed of connecting thought to words, but never her humor, intellect or compassion. Now, battling cancer as well, she just keeps going, putting one foot in front of the other and sending ME emails with sermon topics and ideas between chemo treatments and their terrible side effects. Her resilience reminds me that I can be resilient too.

A side note is that the opposite of this is true as well - the critical voices we hear inside us, people who knock us down and make us feel less-than - those voices don't make us more resilient, they make us less able to deal with whatever life brings us. You have my Rabbinic Permission to tell those voices to shut up.

Another way to build resilience is to speak our truths. Organizing and speaking out about the values we hold dear - loudly, proudly, and effectively. In January, my daughter, Noa, and I joined dozens of BHC members, thousands of Reform Jews from across the country, half a million people in Washington and an estimated 5 million people spread around the globe for the Women's March. As you know, the issues behind the protest were diverse, but in the end, the message was simple. It was about human dignity because women and black people and immigrants and LGBT people and Jews are simply human. An ancient midrash says that

God created just one first man - Adam - so that no one, for the rest of time, could credibly say 'my lineage is more important than yours,' because all of us ultimately have the same original DNA. If I were writing the midrash, I'd have it say just one first man AND one woman, btw.

I went into the march feeling broken and devastated by the hate that had been unleashed in our country, but I left feeling that if that many people still knew and were willing to speak a truth about the worth of ALL human beings - black women, brown children, white men, lesbian, gay, transgendered people then it could not be the case that everything was unalterably broken. Awful things were happening; destructive things are being said and done; but people who do not accept hate and divisiveness, who uphold core Jewish values of justice and compassion are willing to raise their voices and say this is not ok. The march didn't make it all better, not even close, but it gave me and about 5 million other people a little more confidence that we could survive and even do better in the future.

In the Purim story, the Book of Esther, Mordechai tells Queen Esther about the threat to her people, the anti-Semitism breaking out in the country. He tells her about her husband-the-king's role in having been manipulated into decreeing her people's destruction. She doesn't immediately feel brave enough to speak out, but Mordechai reminds her, "Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape, any more than all the Jews. For if you remain silent at this time, then relief and deliverance will arise to the Jews from another place; but you and your father's house will be destroyed. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this." Speaking truth to power, even when we feel completely powerless, builds our own resilience, reminds us that what doesn't kill us makes us stronger.

So, resilience is a skill that we build by following the light of those who are stronger and wiser and more inspiring. And it is a skill that we build by gathering up courage to speak our truth. It is also a skill we build by reaching out a hand to lift someone else up, even when we ourselves are suffering.

The great psychiatrist, neurologist and philosopher Victor Frankl lived through the Holocaust in Thereisenstadt, Auschwitz and Dachau. In Thereisenstadt he was allowed to set up a psycho-hygiene unit in the camp hospital, and later a suicide prevention department which he established with Regina Jonas, the first woman in history to be ordained a Rabbi. Through his experiences in the camps, Frankl found that resilience comes from a person holding on to meaning and purpose in life. For some, that meaning and purpose was rooted in their ability to help their fellow sufferers.

Frankl writes: "We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that **everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms--to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.** And there were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom; which determined whether or not you would become the plaything of circumstance, renouncing freedom and dignity to become molded into the form of the typical inmate."

Whether we find our resilience in those who inspire us, in speaking our truths with conviction or reaching out to lift someone else up, these things that do not kill us will make us stronger. With my prayer for all of us to find our strength in the coming year, I will leave you with the words of the great Dr. Maya Angelou,

Still I Rise

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

...⁴

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear

I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear

I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

I rise

I rise

I rise.