

FACING THE STORMS IN OUR LIVES

SERMON FIRST DAY ROSH HASHANAH 5778 – 2017

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I'm going to be honest with you. This summer just has not quite turned out the way that I had planned. It was supposed to go something like this: After sharing in my favorite holiday tradition – the all-night study on *Shavuot*, I would head to Europe to lead our congregation's Jewish Heritage Tour of Budapest, Prague and Berlin. The rest of the summer would be punctuated by two bike trips I was planning to take. I would ride my bicycle from Cleveland to Cincinnati and then along the Erie Canal from Buffalo to Albany. And of course, the *piece de resistance* – the most important, the single most important event of the summer by far – was that at the end of August we would celebrate our daughter's wedding.

Well, the wedding was unbelievable – beautiful, joyful, the happiest day of my life. I still pinch myself. It's hard to believe that it was real; and for that I will forever be grateful to God. It was a weekend filled with absolute magic.

But the rest of the summer? Well by now you all know about my car accident in May – yes, for the record: car, not bike! Despite my repeated attempts to force myself back into the world, my injuries were severe enough that I was basically out of commission the whole summer. Two weeks before the wedding I was still unsure I would be able to enjoy my daughter's big day. Even now, though I have returned fully to work, a number of problems related to the injury persist. I won't be riding my bike any time soon.

So, this summer did not turn out in the way I had planned for and expected. The truth is, that's how life is for most of us.

As the Yiddish proverb says, "A man plans and God laughs." Except it's not always funny. Many times, when our life goes "off script" we find ourselves confronted with tremendous, even overwhelming adversity.

For Sheryl Sandberg, the C.O.O. of Facebook, life went "off script" when she found her husband lying dead of a heart attack on the floor of a gym at the resort where they were vacationing in Mexico. In her book, [Option B](#), she tells the story of how, weeks later, she and a friend, Phil were planning a father-child activity. They came up with a plan for someone to fill in for her husband, Dave. She cried to her friend, "But I want Dave." Phil put his arm around her and said, "Option A is not available. So, let's kick the 'heck' out of Option B."

That statement pretty much sums up life's challenges. For better and for worse, few of us live a life that is always Option A. We live a life that is always some form of option B.

Raise your hand if your life is turning out exactly the way you thought it would, if your life followed the trajectory that you expected and there have been no surprises, pleasant or unpleasant along the way.... Go ahead.... You see, no one goes untouched.

There is an expression in the Talmud, the rabbis said: *Tzarot rabim chatzi nechama* – "the troubles of the many are a half-comfort." It helps to at least know that we are not alone.

If our lives sailed along as we planned and envisioned them, we would have no need for these holidays with their soul-searching and introspection, their pleas for forgiveness, for blessing and life. We would not sing through our tears as we chant the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer: “On *Rosh Hashanah* it is written and on *Yom Kippur* it is sealed: Who shall live and who shall die, who shall wander and who shall be at peace, who shall wax rich and who shall be impoverished, who shall be exalted and who shall be brought low?” No... in place of the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer – if our lives were Option A – we would come, offer a prayer of thanksgiving, have some apples and honey and call it a day.

We are here because too often life throws at us challenges that come from nowhere and seem utterly insurmountable. It might be a sudden injury that brings our lives to a grinding halt. Or the shattering of a relationship around which our world was built. Or the loss of a job leaving us unsure how to meet our needs and the needs of those we love. It might be suddenly confronting serious debilitating, degenerative or God forbid terminal illness. It might be our grief over the death of a loved one, especially when that death comes unexpected and too soon, most especially if it is the loss of a child. And this year, in this congregation, as I look out at all of you, I know that we have seen far too many storms.

Like the Hurricanes which brought such devastation to Texas, Florida and the Caribbean, these events sweep in with a force that cannot be deterred and utterly change the landscape of our lives. Sooner or later it happens to all of us, sometimes repeatedly, sometimes coming as many storms at once. And after the storm, we are never the same.

In her book, Sheryl Sandberg uses her experience to guide us through the challenges of accepting Option B and learning how to confront and move beyond adversity and rebuild our lives. In doing so, she turns to the writings of the founder of positive psychology, Martin Seligman. Dr. Seligman underscores what he sees as three impediments to our ability to recover from adversity and go on. He calls these three impediments the Three P’s: Personalization, Pervasiveness and Permanence. Learning how to avoid these three Ps would take us a long way toward nurturing the resilience that we need to overcome the challenges in our lives.

Personalization is the belief that we are at fault. When something goes wrong in our lives there is a great tendency to want to blame ourselves. Sheryl tortured herself with the illusion that she had been responsible for her husband’s death. If only she had gotten to the gym in time she could have saved him. If only she had realized that he had heart disease, she could have saved him. That guilt in turn spilled over into her apologizing for everything in her life: to her mother, who put her life on hold to stay with her, to her friends who dropped everything to come to the funeral, to her clients for missing appointments, to her colleagues for losing focus. It took her a long time to understand that if the doctors didn’t know that her husband was going to have a heart attack, how could she? Her psychologist made her ban the words “I’m sorry” from her vocabulary.

Now you may be thinking, “Rabbi, isn’t that what these High Holidays are all about? Aren’t I supposed to feel guilt for the things that I’ve done wrong? Shouldn’t I apologize to those people that I’ve hurt? In fact, isn’t the whole point of the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer to move us to *teshuvah*, to repentance?”

And the answer is yes... yes, of course it is. This is the season of *teshuvah*. And *teshuvah* is fundamentally about recognizing where we have fallen down, what we have done wrong, who we have hurt; and seeking to change. That is the prime goal we engage in at this time of year.

But sometimes when we are hurting, we can confuse what we have done wrong with the hurt that we are feeling. There is a difference between apologizing for that which is within our power and feeling guilty for that which is beyond our control. Let me say that again: *There is a difference between apologizing for that which is within our power and feeling guilty for that which is beyond our control.*

That's why over and over again during these holidays we will ask God for two things: *selichah* and *mechilah*. Those two words are repeated over and over again in the High Holiday liturgy.

Selichah means forgiveness. God should forgive us for the things that we have done wrong, for the people that we have hurt, for the ways in which we have turned away from God's commandments, for our failures of morality and ethics. *Selichah* is forgiveness for our sins.

Mechilah is often translated into English in our prayerbooks as "pardon;" but that's not really an accurate translation of the word. To be "*moichel*" somebody – maybe some of you recognize that word if I say it in the Yiddish. It's the same word – to be "*moichel*" somebody means to relieve them of responsibility. Somebody has an obligation to me and I say "I *moichel* you" – "you don't have to do that." *Selichah* is God forgiving us for what we did wrong. *Mechilah* to be "*moicheled*" is God releasing us of the burden of those things for which we are *not* responsible. God is saying to us: "Let go of that! You did not control that. Don't let that weigh you down." God forgives us for those things too because sometimes we have to learn to forgive ourselves, to let go and to be able move on. We have to be able to move past personalization.

The second P, pervasiveness, is the belief that an event will affect every aspect of our lives. It is the belief that if we are suffering or grieving or struggling over one thing in our lives, then we must suffer, grieve or struggle in every other part of our life as well. Everywhere we look we see pain and sorrow. And should we feel momentarily happy, we beat ourselves up and feel guilty about it.

In her book, Sheryl Sandberg writes: "As I blamed myself less, I started to notice that not everything was terrible. My son and daughter were sleeping through the night, crying less and playing more. We had access to grief counselors and therapists, I could afford childcare and support at home. I had loving friends and colleagues." Being able to feel success, joy, love and peace in other aspects of our lives allows us to access our spiritual reserves, to find the strength to go on.

This is what our sages called "*hakarat ha-tov*" -- recognizing and acknowledging the good in our lives, taking stock of our blessings and expressing gratitude. That may seem obvious to you or, if you are hurting right now, it may seem incredibly hard. But our tradition is clear that as Jews we are bidden to find sources of joy in our lives even in our times of sorrow, and to find good that we are thankful for even when we are struggling.

When someone passes away, we observe the rites of mourning. During *shiva*, for seven days, we don't leave our homes. We wear the torn garment. We engage in all the mourning practices. Except for one day of that seven. Which day is that? Shabbat. Shabbat overrides the mourning. The rabbis teach that Shabbat counts as one of the seven but we don't observe it as one of the seven. We are not allowed to mourn or grieve on Shabbat. Why not? Because on that day we have an obligation to express our gratitude to God for the gift of creation, of peoplehood, of Torah. We have an obligation to be with community and feel appreciation for the other lives that touch us, support us and uplift us. *Hakarat ha-tov*: Even in our deepest pain, we have to recognize the good.

So many good things happen in our lives every day, small and large, that we too often take for granted. The very fact that we are alive and breathing, that we have family, friends and community. The beauty of our natural world. It can be as simple as, for me, the small miracle of the invention of silicone ear plugs that enabled me to dance at and enjoy my daughter's wedding despite the loud volume of the band! For others, maybe it's the miracle of cochlear implants, or of a walker that allows you to be more active and get around and not be tied down, or recovery from a recent illness, or getting a job, making a friend, or finding love. Maybe it's just a beautiful day, or having just a little less pain today than yesterday. There are so many good things that happen in our lives at every moment. Far more than the dark moments we face. And when we can recognize and acknowledge them, when we can tackle the pervasiveness, we are on the road to healing.

The third impediment to our recovery -- the third P, permanence -- is the belief that the aftershocks of the event will last forever: that because one relationship ended we will never find a new partner, because we failed once we will always fail, that because we are grieving a loss we will never again feel joy. Sandberg shares that "For months, no matter what I did, I felt like the debilitating anguish would always be there. Most of the people I knew who had lived through tragedy said that over time the sadness subsides... I didn't believe them." She goes on to say, "When my children cried, I would flash forward to their entire lives without a father. Dave wasn't just going to miss a soccer game, but all the soccer games. All the debate tournaments. All the holidays. All the graduations. He would not walk our daughter down the aisle at her wedding."

Here's the thing: it's all true. Her husband would not be at any of those events. But what is not true is that all those events would therefore completely void of any joy, that she would feel the same grief then that she felt at the time of his passing. The human soul is hard-wired for optimism and hope. Give us a cloud and sooner or later we will find a silver lining. In fact, Sheryl Sandberg brings studies in her book that show that we all tend to overestimate how much negative events will affect us.

In one study, some students were asked to imagine their current romantic relationship ending and predict how unhappy they would be two months later. Other students were asked to report their unhappiness two months after an actual break-up. Guess what? Those who experienced a real split were far happier than expected. In other studies assistant professors thought being denied university tenure would leave them despondent for the next five years. College students predicted they would be miserable if they got stuck in an undesirable dorm.

Both turn out to not be true. The bottom line is we are very bad, and overly pessimistic, in predicting our future emotional state.

How do you combat that feeling of permanence? By banishing words like “never” and “always.” Instead of saying “I will always be struggling,” say to yourself “*today* I am struggling.” Instead of saying “I will never again know joy,” try saying “*sometimes* I can’t feel joy.” Live in the moment; and if the moment is sad, or difficult, or frustrating that’s okay. But you own that moment, don’t let that moment own you. Don’t let the moment define you. Remember that what you feel today does not determine what you will feel tomorrow. Leave yourself open to the possibility of feeling joy and joy will find you.

At the end of her book, Sheryl Sandberg writes: “But just as grief crashes into us like a wave, it also rolls back like the tide. We are left not just standing, but in some ways stronger.”

The challenges and storms in our lives don’t need to be personal, pervasive or permanent; but resilience can be. We can build it and carry it with us throughout our lives. We can recognize when to let go of guilt. We can learn again to feel gratitude. We can rise above our grief and allow ourselves to rediscover love and joy. For all those who suffered the effects of Irma, Harvey and Maria, and for each of us facing storms in our personal lives, may the coming year be a year of resilience, a year of rebuilding, a year of hope and healing and blessing.