

**High Holy Days 5781/2020**  
**Rosh Hashanah Sermon**  
**Cantor Harriet Dunkerley**  
**Temple B'nai Chaim**

## **Resilience and Hope**

### A Story

It is Bessarabia, an historical region in Eastern Europe bound by the Dniester river on the east and the Prut river on the west – a small village in Ukraine called Kamenetz Podolsk, late 1890's/early 1900's. Yosl (Joseph) Breaman lived there with his family. They were not peasants. In fact, as a manager of a nobleman's estate, Yosl's father was fairly well-off. Thus, Yosl and his family were spared much of the hardship and persecution most of their fellow Jews suffered at the time. Nevertheless, as Yosl grew, so did the anti-semitism that raged in that part of the world, and by 1903, anti-Jewish sentiments had reached a boiling point resulting in the Kishinev Easter pogrom that occurred in April of that year. Yosl had already served in the army, and fearing the worst violence was still to come knew he had to get out of the region if he was to save himself and his newly pregnant wife, Elke. So, he devised a plan, stashed some money away and through connections, perhaps those of his father, he had someone bring him women's clothing. He escaped the region dressed as a woman, hidden in a hay cart!

Yosl made his way to America and settled in Pittsburgh where his brother-in-law had a dairy business. He never saw his parents or his younger brother again. Soon though he had saved enough to send for his wife who arrived with their baby daughter under one arm and her samovar under the other speaking only Yiddish and a little Ukrainian. Elke, now Ella, never returned to Kamenetz Podolsk and never again saw the family she left behind. The three set about beginning a new life in America. Yosl, now Joseph, worked his way up in his brother-in-law's business, saved his money and eventually opened a grocery store of his own, and then a bar. When Prohibition hit, he went back to the grocery business until it ended, and he could return to the bar. He and Ella weren't wealthy by any means, but they raised 5 children and became fixtures in the Jewish community. Joseph understood his real success was marrying Ella (it was love at first sight) and raising a family with her. An incredibly close family, the children were devoted to each other and their parents, Joseph and Ella, who remained deeply religious throughout their lives. Joseph was a trusted friend to many in the community – someone who helped those less fortunate – a kind man with a generous heart and an optimistic spirit, despite the trials he had survived, who went on to become one of the founding members of The Beth Sholom, a preeminent Jewish congregation in Pittsburgh that has now been in existence for over 100 years. He was not a complainer and rarely talked about the circumstances that drove him to leave his homeland and family. Through pogroms, emigration, prolonged separation from loved ones, learning a new language, losing his livelihood and countless other trials, Yosl and Elke relied on their unwavering love of family, faith in God and in their Jewish community to sustain them, even in the worst of times.

Who was Yosl Braeman? My great grandfather, Joseph Braemer.

It has been a very challenging year. Almost 200,000 Americans have died from Covid 19, thousands more have lost jobs, businesses have closed, and many, many more people will have ongoing health issues from the toll Covid took on their bodies. Tens of black Americans were killed by police brutality. Even this morning, unprecedented fires continue to burn hundreds of thousands of acres in CA destroying everything in their path and driving people from their homes. We have seen armed, uninvited government troops on our streets. Decades from now, we will speak of this period the way our grandparents talked about the great depression. Something unimaginable, and unprecedented. Something awful that we somehow managed to muddle through.

But when we are in the middle of it, it is hard to see any end in sight.

And yet, when we look at our history – ancient and more recent – we see extraordinary stories of hope and optimism. Like Yosl and Elke's story. We see stories of people who lost everything and then worked to rebuild, and perhaps more importantly, people whose faith in humanity – and goodness, was shattered, and who still managed – somehow – to emerge from trauma with their souls intact.

How – what is it – that allowed these people to thrive, to rebuild, and above all, to live a life of joy and meaning when the opposite would have been just as likely – even understandable?

Psychologists have found that the most resilient people share three key things: the first is love. Why love? Because being loved reassures us we are of intrinsic value. Knowing we are loved assures us that no matter what happens, we are of worth, and we matter. But it isn't just love – another factor that makes us resilient is counterintuitive: it's stress, and adversity. Have we lived a life free of real challenge? Free of responsibility, accountability, and pressure? If so, psychologists suggest, we are far less likely to have coping mechanisms to call on when life get tough. No matter how loved we know ourselves to be, we will simply crumble under pressure – without a crucible to have forged us, we never learn to bounce back. Having failed, and then rebuilt from that failure, inoculates us against brittleness, teaches us strength, resilience, even post-traumatic growth. And finally, the third thing the most resilient individuals share is community. They belong to a community, which supports them when terrible things happen. It gives them a sense that their loss and grief, is not theirs to hold by themselves. They are not alone. And together, we all will prevail.

The Jewish story, writ large, contains ample love, ample challenge, and incredible stories of the power of community.

First, love: spiritually and theologically, our liturgy tells us daily that we are loved. Ahavat Olam, Ahavah Rabbah – both of these prayers that we are meant to sing multiple times a day – say, God loves you, so God gave you the Torah, and not only did God give you the Torah, but God loves you, with an unending love.

An excerpt from the Ahavah Rabbah:

“[With] a great love you have loved us, Eternal, our God; [with] a great and superabundant compassion have You had compassion upon us. Our Parent our Sovereign – for the sake of our ancestors who trusted in You, and You taught them the laws of life; so [too] grace us and teach us. Our Parent, merciful parent, the merciful One – have mercy upon us, and put into our hearts to understand and to comprehend and to listen and to study and to teach and to keep and to do and to preserve all of the words of the study of Your Torah with love. And enlighten our eyes in Your Torah, and make our heart cling to Your commandments, and unite our hearts to love and be in awe of your name; and may we never be embarrassed ever.”

What do we learn from this? First, that no matter what – God loves us. No matter how low we have fallen, how broken we may be, not only does God love us, but because of that boundless love and mercy, we should also be free of shame, and embarrassment. And no matter how bad things are, we are always beloved, of intrinsic worth, and our end of this bargain is only that we should study Torah, and love God back.

Why does the Ahavah Rabbah pray that we should be free from embarrassment in its declaration of God’s eternal love? Perhaps because psychology has shown that shame makes us brittle and leaves us feeling empty inside, no matter how great our achievements or overwhelmingly we are adored. And love, particularly unconditional positive regard, is the equal and opposite of this: love makes us boundless and strong no matter the failures or challenges we face; love is the north star that reassures us of our own value.

So, what about the second part of this recipe for resilience –stress? Surely it won’t shock you to hear that there’s been some stress over the course of Jewish history. From slavery in Egypt to pogroms in Russia and Poland, to the decimation of the Baghdadi Jewish community to the Inquisition to the Shoah to the forging of the modern state of Israel, we are a people who has overcome repeated trauma, displacement and challenge. And despite it all, we have emerged, repeatedly, intact and connected to our Judaism. Which makes us one of the world’s most astounding success stories – despite the challenges and despite the stress (or, perhaps, because of it). The founding and establishment of the state of Israel, which is often described as a miracle – is thus not so much a miracle as a remarkable, almost unthinkable feat of resilience – the stubborn insistence that we are a people *worthy* of a homeland, a people so certain of our value, so tied to our faith in something better, hope that we will one day come home, that we were able to overcome unbelievable obstacles with smarts, incredibly hard work, and an indefatigable hope. This is why the name of the Israeli national anthem, “HaTikva” is simply: “The Hope”.

Finally, community: for thousands of years, the Jewish people have relied on the support of our community, especially when things were at their bleakest. There are extraordinary stories about this: Jews holding Passover seders in ghettos and concentration camps, founding kibbutzim in the deserts of Israel, pooling their resources to support the destitute in Pale of Settlement shtetls even when they, themselves, had almost nothing. Perhaps the cruelest part of Covid is that it has removed this protective barrier from us and stolen our ability to be

together, in song, in grief, in person. What has always been extraordinary about the High Holy Days is that no matter the trauma of the preceding year, they have always happened, together. Days after 9/11, the Jewish community came together for Rosh HaShanah, during the Inquisition they came together in hidden Spanish basements, men sang the Kol Nidre prayer on Yom Kippur in Auschwitz, and after Hurricane Katrina, in Houston, in shells of buildings in New Orleans, the community reconstituted itself and was buoyed by its endurance, and fidelity to one another.

This year too, we have been resilient and found ways of being together via technology. That said, it is not the same. Looking out at our empty sanctuary right now is surreal and sad – it feels like part TV studio and part worship space – and, the fact that so many of you have chosen to be here virtually this morning is a testimony to our need for community, and song, and the magic that only happens when we gather. It is also a reminder of why community is so important, and how much we need each other – especially now, when we cannot hug, cannot schmooze, cannot do our yearly check ins with one another or measure the passing of time by how different we look, and commiserate about how strange and tenuous the world is right now. It is a reminder that community has always been at the heart of our collective resilience, and it is all the more important for us to build it right now, in whatever ways we can.

We need each other. Our ability to not only survive, but thrive in this moment of national crisis depends on not only on believing that we are infinitely loved and valued, but using that knowledge to maintain and build community, and with it, a sort of communal faith, and hope, that together, we will get through this. Together.

The Talmud tells this story: The Gemara relates: Once, Rabbi Akiva was walking along the road and came to a certain city. He inquired about lodging and they did not give him any. He said: Everything that God does, He does for the best. He went and slept in a field, and had with him a rooster, a donkey and a candle. A gust of wind came and extinguished the candle; a cat came and ate the rooster; and a lion came and ate the donkey. He said: Everything that God does, He does for the best. That night, an army came and took the city into captivity. It turned out that Rabbi Akiva alone, who was not in the city and had no lit candle, noisy rooster or donkey to give away his location, was saved. He said to them: Didn't I tell you? Everything that God does, He does for the best. (Berachot 60b)

While I, and we, may not concur with Rabbi Akiva's conclusion that everything is for the best, the story itself is a testimony to Jewish faith in the face of fear, and hope in the face of insecurity. It is also an object lesson in the transience of even the most difficult moments. Our moments of loss or need or trauma don't ever have to be the end of the story – in fact, they may just be the beginning.

May this new year – 5781 – be just such a beginning, for us, our families, our nation, and the entire world.