



*This is a transcript of a video recorded for High Holidays of 2020/5781, part of a rich collection of resources available at: <https://www.reconstructingjudaism.org/highholidays2020>.*

**Cultivating Resilience: Opening Ourselves to the Full Magnitude of the Days of Awe**  
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*Shanah tovah, happy new year.*

There is a maxim that what you pay attention to grows. I want to invite you to pay attention to transformation. Ultimately, this is what the high holiday season is about—the possibility of radical transformation. One of the Hebrew terms for high holidays is *Yamim Nora'im*, Days of Awe, and this descriptor offers us a guide. If we allow ourselves to enter into a space where awe is possible, we will be altered. We will more deeply understand our limitations and our agency. We will move through the world with humility and great power.

My immediate goal is to extend an invitation to engage deeply in the themes and practices of the high holidays. And my larger goal is to make the case for how this kind of immersive encounter with the breadth and depth of Jewish wisdom and living can help us to cultivate resilience not only in this season, but all the time. I think we all agree there is a deep need to cultivate resilience. We are months into a worldwide pandemic that has altered every aspect of our lives and savaged the global economy, that is exacerbating existing income inequality. Evidence of the ravages of climate change continue to mount. In America, we are approaching a monumental election and engaged in overdue conversations about racial justice for Black and brown people. The political situation in the Middle East is increasingly volatile. Such turmoil. Such uncertainty.

Some of us are skilled at navigating turmoil and uncertainty. Others of us struggle. But all of us, Jewish, Jew-ish, Jewish adjacent, wisdom seekers drawn to Judaism, all of us can draw from the rich Jewish legacy. Our ancestors knew how to survive fraught times and how to make meaning, find joy, create and dream and build and renew. We can learn from them. The high holiday season is an extended opportunity to engage in teachings and prayers, rituals and practices that urge us, even demand from us, that we ask ultimate questions and that we formulate responses, however provisional, that reach for justice and nurture interdependence.

**Part I: From Reconstruction (noun) to Reconstructionist (adjective) to Reconstructing (predicate if you're a grammar geek, verb if you're not)**

Last summer, my wife Christina and I listened to the memoir *Educated*, by Tara Westover. She starts with an epigraph from master educator John Dewey, drawn from his 1897 Pedagogical Creed:



“I believe finally that education must be conceived as a continuing *reconstruction* of experience, that the process and the goal of education are one and the same thing.”

Christina is a professor of education and she has read Dewey and spent her career advancing progressive education, so she knew the quote. But she had no idea what I said about it. “The ‘reconstruction of experience’—that’s where Mordecai Kaplan got the name Reconstructionism from. Kaplan loved Dewey, and he was totally energized by this idea that process and goal are one and the same. He believed this was true on the individual level and also on the civilizational level, about the breadth of Jewish living.”

Christina has been my patient listener and coach for 20 years and she supported me through years of work on a dissertation on Reconstructionist history. When I stopped talking, she looked thunderstruck. As committed to Reconstructionism as she is, this piece of information was revelatory to her. Christina is far from the first person to miss the *dynamic* intention embedded into the very name of our movement. As an historian of Reconstructionism, I can attest that the way our name invites confusion and fails to communicate our core commitments has been an ongoing challenge to the Reconstructionist movement since our establishment 100 years ago.

Let me unpack this a bit. Mordecai Kaplan deeply believed in active change, in evolution. He thought it happened to us—like a pandemic that suddenly alters our individual and collective trajectories. And he thought we could make it happen—like proactively introducing rituals that recognize the parity of women in religious life, as he did with his daughter Judith’s bat mitzvah in 1922. Because Kaplan embraced change, he mistrusted anyone who said Judaism is in its essence this one thing or that. He understood that there has always been vast diversity in the ways Jews have lived, across time and space. He saw this evolving diversity as a sign of vitality and as one of the factors that has kept the Jewish people alive across millennia.

Kaplan chose the name “Reconstructionism” to bring John Dewey’s wisdom to the Jews, to make the case that choosing to live an intentional Jewish life, one open to continuing reconstruction that we ourselves set in motion, can help us to blossom as individuals, and we can understand ourselves as individuals who are nurtured in a transgenerational community that itself is collectively committed to reconstruction.

Kaplan inspired and influenced many people but his ideas never found mass appeal. In truth, I think the best way to understand Reconstructionism isn’t through explanation but through demonstration—attend a personalized baby naming, spend time at a vital congregation, come to a Reconstructionist convention with people from around the world...This is one reason why we changed the name of the central organization of the Reconstructionist movement to Reconstructing Judaism. When I talk about our work in the noun and adjective ways—Reconstructionism, Reconstructionist—folks tend to look at me blankly. When I use the verb, people get what we are about right away. We are reconstructing Judaism. A lot of people—hopefully you—love our activist approach, some people think it’s way too bold, and there are



some who think that maybe it's too much work for them. But everyone has a clearer sense of our commitments with this name.

I'm not proposing another name change, but there is another concept that I think gets after what Kaplan was seeking that works more effectively than Dewey's "reconstruction," and this is resilience.

## **Part II: Resilience: The Presumption of Active Process**

The American Psychological Association defines resilience as "the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats and even significant sources of stress." Psychiatrist George Vaillant offers up the image of resilience as a "twig with a fresh, green living core," something that, after encountering pressure, springs back and continues to grow.

Judaism, writ large, is about resilience. Across the span of Jewish history, Jews have experienced extensive trauma, even catastrophe, and we have survived – as a people and as a civilization. After each catastrophe, the prevailing paradigm was inoperable: we no longer knew how to understand ourselves in relation to God, to other Jews, and to other peoples. And, throughout our history, Jews have ultimately transcended catastrophe after catastrophe. We have repeatedly breathed new life into the Jewish people, the Jewish religion, the breadth of the Jewish civilization, and we have found pathways toward repair. From trauma, we have had to heal. We have had to recover and re-vision, re-seed and regenerate vital Jewish life. We have found ways to cultivate resilience, both individually and collectively.

Applying the concept of resilience to Judaism opens up a pathway to the huge number of folks who feel distant from Jewish life. Their distance is a huge failure of organized Judaism to speak to the interests and aspirations of so many contemporary Jews. This is part of what Kaplan was trying to do, make the case for Judaism in the modern era. Kaplan believed there was much in modern life that could be helpful: Jews could self-consciously embrace change and use it to introduce things like democracy and egalitarianism and to set aside things like chauvinism. And he also saw Judaism as an important correction to excesses in modern American life—our commitment to community could correct an over-embrace of individualism; Shabbat could be a bulwark against the relentlessness of industrialization and, today, technology; the fostering of religious and ethnic diversity could guard against homogenizing ideologies that champion, well, supremacism.

In our day, making the case for progressive Judaism is important, even urgent work. Some of it is for our own sake: Judaism offers wisdom and practices to nurture us, comfort us, prod us—whatever our backgrounds, whatever our interests. A progressive approach to Judaism gives us ways to be passionate simultaneously about our particularistic communities and our universalist commitments. I fiercely believe that we can be proud Jews in the modern world without walling ourselves off from it. And some of this work is for the world's sake. We see fundamentalism and ethnocentrism and supremacism rising all around us. Can we

demonstrate a powerful expression of progressive religion, one that fosters us in our distinctiveness and that confidently encounters and partners with other groups? We see that there are people willing to die for their causes. Can we make the case—in gorgeous and compelling ways—about what we are willing to live for?

When I make the case for Judaism, I have found that applying a social scientific lens can help because it introduces another source of authority. Contested authority is a hallmark of our times. Where our ancestors were largely convinced by religion based on revelation, for many of us, religion competes with rationalism. We look to science or other explanations for why the world is the way it is and what we should do while we are on this earth. And we wrestle with how we make decisions. For our ancestors, the answer was “because God said so,” or perhaps “because the rabbi said so.” But since the beginning of the modern era, answers increasingly have been “because science says so” or “because I say so.”

So, alongside Jewish sources, I also put forward psychology as a secular authority, which validates longstanding religious practices by confirming that they cultivate resilience and well-being. And this approach gives some people permission to explore Jewish wisdom and Jewish practices where a strictly Jewish framing might be alienating or intimidating.

And the resilience frame is not just for folks distant from Judaism. In my own experience, it highlights how nurturing and comprehensive Jewish living can be. Let me give you two examples, though I could go on and on.

- Experts on resilience warn against isolation and urge us to build webs of connection and mutual obligation. In Jewish terms, we talk about making a *minyan*, the requirement to show up for other people. Whether it is from a sense of being commanded or it’s an obligation we voluntarily take on, when we show up for other people, we willingly submerge our own interests to the needs of others. Paradoxically, this choice serves our own psychological and spiritual well-being.
- There is ample research about how cultivating a gratitude practice can improve our well-being. We might understand the command in Judaism to recite 100 blessings/day legalistic at best, oppressive at worst. When we approach that teaching with a resilience lens, we can understand it as an invitation to engage in an ongoing gratitude practice, to raise up the interdependence and abundance that undergird our daily lives even when our days are filled with challenge and loss.

### **Part III: Trauma: Acknowledging the Shadow**

Resilience is a positive framing. Cultivating resilience implies that there is some crisis from which we must recover. Whether we acknowledge the shadow, when we talk about resilience, at least implicitly we are talking about a trajectory from trauma to resilience.

I want to point you to an extraordinary guide recently published by Reconstructing Judaism that was created by Rabbi Jessica Rosenberg, “Introduction to Trauma, Healing and Resilience for Rabbis, Jewish Educators and Organizers.” In the guide, she discusses multiple kinds of trauma. There is individual trauma, a terrible event that happens to just one person, like being hit by a car, though these experiences ripple through that person’s community for sure. Intergenerational trauma is passed down through a family system. Collective trauma refers to large-scale, devastating events that have a widespread impact on a community beyond the moment. Historical and ancestral trauma are the emotional and psychological wounding that arise from collective trauma and that have accumulated over generations. And there is secondary trauma, or vicarious trauma, which can occur in those who witness trauma or who support people recovering from trauma.

I could spell out examples of each from Jewish history. I could share stories of each from 2020’s headlines. I’m sure you can as well.

Some of us carry pain that we do not consider trauma, and that nonetheless needs healing. However you understand it, whatever the source of your pain, the cultivation of resilience is a path oriented toward healing. Here’s where I want to go back to the beginning of my talk. John Dewey was talking about education, but his observation is equally true of resilience: the process and the goal of resilience are one and the same thing, and resilience is a constant act of reconstruction. Like education, like Judaism, resilience is not “once and done.” We are, all of us, always a work in progress, by necessity. To live as a human being is to hurt and be hurt. To live fully means we must find ways to heal and heal from hurt. To live in society is to encounter or experience injustice. To live as moral human beings in society means we must work to undo injustice, to create more justice. As Rabbi Max Reynolds teaches, “The goal is not healing [trauma] and ‘getting back to normal.’ The goal is figuring out how to live the lives we’re living now, here, in this place, how to be strong, how to love, how to dare. Scar tissue is extraordinarily strong..., but it’s not a healed-up version of what was once before. It’s something entirely new.”

We must cultivate resilience so that we can take up our obligations and our opportunities as individuals and members of society. Judaism offers so many pathways toward this end. I want to finish up my talk focusing on the *Yamim Nora'im*, the Days of Awe, as one such pathway.

#### **Part IV: Acting and Yielding, Yielding and Acting: Holding Ourselves Accountable and Being Held by Community**

The high holidays are an invitation to engage in *heshbon hanefesh*, a reflection on our choices past and present, and to engage in *teshuvah*, turning—away from problematic behavior, toward life-affirming, justice-seeking, relationship-centering choices. Let me be clear: Judaism doesn’t limit this type of self-examination to the high holidays—there are prayers and practices that span the entire year. But this season, beginning with the month of Elul, is given over to *teshuvah*. We are invited to deepen our capacity for introspection and to prepare

ourselves for the awesomeness that we will encounter. In the words of Rabbi Alan Lew, from his beautiful book *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared*:

[This] is real whether you believe in God or not. Perhaps God made it real and perhaps God did not. Perhaps God created this pageant of judgment and choice, of transformation, of life and of death. Perhaps God created the Book of Life and the Book of Death, *Teshuvah* and the blowing of the shofar. Or perhaps these are all just inventions of human culture. It makes no difference. It is equally real in any case...[I]t's real and it is happening right now and it is happening to us, and it is utterly inescapable, and we are completely unprepared. This moment is before us with its choices, and the consequences of our past choices are before us, as is the possibility of our transformation. This year some of us will die, and some of us will live, and all of us will change." (104-106)

We all must face this reality for ourselves. And, thank God, whether or not you believe in God, we need not do this on our own.

The Days of Awe are both a mirror and a map for our lives and our society. The *Yamim Nora'im* give us a pathway to hold ourselves accountable and to help us make meaning in our lives. This season is an extended encounter with our fragility, both physical and moral. It is set up so that we look, long and hard, both inward at our own lives and outward at the society we create and participate in. Sarah Hurwitz, Michelle Obama's speech writer, published a book this year titled *Here All Along: Finding Meaning, Spirituality, and a Deeper Connection to Life—in Judaism (After Finally Choosing to Look There)*. She writes:

During this season, we step back and ask ourselves: How's it going? Not in the meaningless small-talk sense of that question, when the response is always, "Fine," but in the big existential sense that requires an honest answer and prompts further questions, like "Am I a good person?" and "Am I living a good life?"

It is my hope that you will dive in most deeply to whatever speaks to you, or whatever your community is exploring. Here are some of the themes that I will be exploring.

On Rosh Hashanah, we proclaim *hayom harat olam*, today is the birthday of the world. It's an invitation to glory in the beauty of our world, and the gorgeous interdependence of all creatures and systems within it. And this year, we hear Greta Thunberg's challenge, echoed by hundreds of thousands of children decrying the advancing climate catastrophe: "You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words." How will we take up our work as planetary stewards?

As America finally begins to grapple with the sin of slavery and the movement for racial justice, there is so much opportunity for *teshuvah*. For me, one of the most powerful moments of Yom Kippur is right before we chant *Kol Nidrey. Anu matirin lehitpalel im ha'avaryanim*. "[W]e



accept into our midst whoever seeks to pray. Whether righteous or unrighteous, all shall pray as one community.” Righteous and unrighteous together—collectively as a community, and each of us individually. We are all sinners and yet there is the opportunity for *teshuvah*, for repentance. How will atone for centuries of denying that Black lives matter?

The *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer is at the heart of this season. The liturgy draws on midrashim to put forward the image of two ledgers, a book of life and a book of death, and asserts: On Rosh Hashanah, all is written and revealed, and on Yom Kippur, the course of every life is sealed. In the face of the pandemic, “Who will live and who will die?” is a question we ask on a daily basis as we make decisions about how to shop for our families, school our children, connect with our communities. And as more and more people struggle with the economic implications of the pandemic, vulnerability will grow. How will we act as just and caring community members in the face of fear and scarcity?

What happens in between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, it is hoped, is continuing the serious work of *teshuvah*. We look squarely at our own powerlessness and then we hold ourselves accountable in the ways we do have power. Really doing *teshuvah* flays us: we remove our calluses, even our skin, so that we are unprotected. We are fully vulnerable. We are keenly aware of our own mortality.

The prescription our tradition offers is about our agency, the ways that we can act—to bring about more healing, to bring about more justice.

*Uteshuvah utefilah utzedakah ma'avirin et ro'a hagezerah.*

But *teshuvah* and *tefilah* and *zedakah* make easier what God may decree  
Make easier what life holds in store  
Make easier facing the world  
Make easier facing ourselves.

*Teshuvah* is concisely translated as repentance, but the root is about turning--toward to God or Godliness. The Talmud teaches that “God created *teshuvah* before creating the physical world” (BT Pesachim 54a). Rabbi Vivie Mayer suggests we can learn a cosmic truth from this—we will make mistakes and we can atone for them. There is always a pathway to return, to a center or to the next place we need to be in the dynamic process that makes up our lives.

*Tefilah* is prayer. For some of us, prayer is a rich and ongoing conversation with the divine. For others, it is an opportunity to place ourselves in relationship with, in service to something larger. Prayer is a practice in humility, it's an acknowledgment of our interconnectedness, a lifting ourselves out of our own preoccupations and into a larger consciousness.



*Tzedakah* is frequently translated, via the Latin, as charity, but more deeply refers to just actions, about making right what is wrong. *Tzedakah* is not an individual enterprise; it is a social responsibility enacted in the context of community.

We are so small and fragile. We live in a world full of pain and brokenness. In ways intentional and unintentional, we add to that pain, we cause hurt and harm, we perpetuate injustice. The *Yamim Nora'im* invite us to look long and hard at this reality, and to do *teshuvah*, to turn. As Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi teaches in the Talmud, we should turn one day before we die. Rabbi Alan Lew writes: “We never know when that day might be, so we have to turn every day.” And the most amazing thing, I think, is that we don’t have to do this hard and heartbreaking work by ourselves. In the end, we all have to face our own mortality and our own culpability for our actions. But Judaism invites us to do this in community—using the words and wisdom of our ancestors as they work, adding to them and altering them as we need, and to do it alongside—in the flesh or, this year, virtually—tens of thousands of other people earnestly asking—What is the truth of my life? What are the changes I need to make? What are the actions I can take? What a gift.

Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg writes about the imagery of the books of life and death:

To know that we who have no power  
Can be filled with power.  
When we wake up to our transparent nature,  
Divine forgiveness shines through us.  
When we forget our names,  
We become part of God’s name.  
When we learn to act and yield, act and yield,  
We smash the contradiction of existence.

May you smash much contradiction this high holiday season. May you find community, real and virtual. May you rest into stillness and introspection and then rise up into agency and action. May you seek and achieve justice. May you and all your dear ones be healthy and be protected from all sickness. May we all write ourselves into the Book of Life. *Leshanah tovah umetukah*—a sweet and a happy and a healthy new year.