

The Secret to Jewish Resilience: A Legacy Written in Blood and Spirit

By Rabbi Ariel Boxman

The Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism fled Tibet in 1959 due to the increasing tension and conflict between Tibetan leaders and the Chinese government. In the face of a prolonged exile, the Dalai Lama sought the wisdom of the Jewish community, whom he viewed as experts in the art of preserving identity in the face of adversity¹.

What he asked, is the secret to Jewish survival in times of hardship and displacement? How do persecuted people find the strength to carry on when all the odds are stacked against them?

The Dalai Lama sought to understand the secret of Jewish resilience. How is it that a people constantly on the verge of demise, an “ever dying people” that we are still here? Philosopher Simon Rawidowicz poignantly stated: “The world makes many images of Israel, but Israel makes only one: that of being constantly on the verge of ceasing to be.”²

Yet, despite our deep-rooted tendency to worry, we must marvel at the resilience of Jewish identity that has endured through millennia of upheaval, displacement, persecution, and violence, often to the brink of annihilation. This resilience is a true conundrum. Mark Twain wrote in 1898, “All things are mortal but the Jew. All other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?”³

This my friends is the million dollar question. What is our secret?

On this Yom Kippur morning, I will be exploring this question, the mystery of Jewish resilience. How, over thousands of years, have we survived as a people? How have we maintained the sacred traditions of our ancestors, even in the face of relentless challenges, persecution, and threats? How have we continued to cultivate a vibrant culture, uphold our rituals, and remain a tightly knit community through it all? The answer to this mystery may be found in just three letters: DNA.

Resilience is embedded into the very fabric of the Jewish people’s DNA, shaped by the experiences of our ancestors and passed down from generation to generation. According to the World Psychiatric Association, the effects of trauma are transmitted across generations, potentially through epigenetic mechanisms.⁴ While DNA itself is like an unchanging alphabet, the way that story is told—how our genes are expressed—can be shaped by life’s experiences. In fact, major trauma can alter the way our DNA is expressed, affecting our mood, health, and, wait

¹ Kamenetz, Roger. *The Jew in the Lotus*. HarperOne, 1994.

² Simon Rawidowicz, *Israel: The Ever-Dying People*, in *Babylon and Jerusalem: Selected Writings of Simon Rawidowicz*, 1986.

³ Mark Twain, "Concerning the Jews," *Harper's Magazine*, March 1898.

⁴ Yehuda, Rachel, et al. "Holocaust Exposure Induced Intergenerational Effects on FKBP5 Methylation." *Biological Psychiatry*, vol. 80, no. 5, 2016, pp. 372-380.

for it, **resilience**. In this way, the struggles, suffering, and triumphs of our ancestors echo within our very being.

But let me be clear: our resilience is not simply an inherited trait. It is not automatic. Resilience, like a muscle, must be honed. It is developed, shaped, and strengthened over time. Many people think of resilience as the ability to “bounce back” from hardship, to return to the state you were in before a crisis disrupted your life.. But Jewish resilience is more than that—it is not simply bouncing back, it’s bouncing forward. It’s the ability to move forward with growth, with deeper understanding, with greater purpose, even as we carry the weight of our past.

So how do the Jewish people “bounce forward” time and time again? How have we grown and strengthened as a people, in the face of suffering and adversity? We do so first and foremost through the performance of rituals that anchor us, and remind us of our strength. We do so through our commitment to sanctifying life. And we do so by holding fast to our unbreakable sense of peoplehood, the deep and abiding connection we share as Jews across time and space.

A few years ago, at an educational conference, a well-known child psychologist surprised everyone by saying, "The best thing a parent can do is fail in front of their children." I remember being taken aback—*What?* How could it possibly be beneficial for a child to witness their parent’s failure? Why would I want my child to see me stumble?

But then the psychologist continued, "When a parent fails in front of their child and **then** gets back up, it shows the child that failure is a part of life; that it’s okay to fall down. What matters is getting back up and trying again." In seeing a parent fail and then rise again, a child learns one of life’s most important skills—resilience. It’s arguably the most valuable lesson a child can learn early in life.

This idea reflects a core lesson within our Jewish tradition. Just as a parent demonstrates resilience by recovering from failure, our religious tradition offers us a powerful model of resilience each year at the Passover Seder. Year after year, we recount the story of our ancestors’ enslavement in Egypt. We don't shy away from recalling the brutality of the experience—the hopelessness, the suffering, the near-destruction of our people. We confront it, we remember it, and we sit with the pain.

But then comes the turning point. We reach the shores of the Red Sea, and we witness the miraculous moment when the waters part before us, revealing a path to freedom and a brighter future. This story serves as our annual reminder: we have faced unimaginable hardship before, and we have overcome it. Each year, we gather around the Seder table to remind ourselves, and each other that no matter how difficult our challenges, we too have the strength to rise. We’ve done it before, and we will do it again.

Through the act of commemoration built deeply within our religious tradition, we are able to endure hardship, to face adversity, and to come out on the other side knowing that we will be ok.

While others may choose to repress or deny painful experiences—and let’s be honest, it often feels easier in the short term to push those difficult memories away—Judaism offers us a different path. In our tradition, we embrace the power of remembering. We live and re-live our most difficult moments, not to dwell in the pain, but to learn and grow from them.

We say “*zachor*”—remember. It is a core commandment repeated throughout the Torah. And why? Because in remembering, we find resilience. When we recall our personal and collective histories, we are given the opportunity to learn from the past in order to inform the present. We do not hide from our history; we confront it, we carry it, and we allow it to shape us in ways that make us stronger.

Research even supports what our tradition has long known. Studies have found that children who know their family stories—those who understand the triumphs, the struggles, the failures, and the perseverance of their ancestors—are more resilient than others. This is not just about knowing facts or dates. It is about understanding that they come from a lineage of people who have faced adversity and come through it. That knowledge provides a source of strength in difficult times.

And if this is true for individual families, how much more so for the Jewish people as a whole? Our deep knowledge of our national story—the Exodus from Egypt, the long exiles, the Holocaust, and countless other moments of trial and triumph—is a key contributor to the resilience of the Jewish people. It is our story that holds us together, that gives us hope, and that reminds us that, no matter what we face, we have always found a way to endure.

As we tell, and retell our national story, whether on Chanukah, Passover or on Purim, we are reminded of our strength and our ability to persevere.

In the 1964 musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye and his family struggle to uphold Jewish traditions and values as external threats grow. In a particularly tense moment, rather than succumbing to despair, Tevye does something unexpected—he sings. Bursting into the lively and infectious drinking song “L’chaim, to Life,” he dispels the looming darkness and replaces it with a joyful celebration of life. “L’chaim, l’chaim, to life! Through song, Tevye shifts the focus from fear to hope, from imminent death, to the sanctification of life.

Each year, on Yom Kippur morning, we read from Parashat Nitzavim. In this portion, God places before us the choice between life and death, good and evil, and we are given a responsibility; a responsibility to make decisions that shape our actions and determine our fate. “See, I set before you today life and good, death and evil. . . . Choose life.”⁵ As a people endowed with free will, it is up to us to make the choice to live. This, I believe, is the essence of resilience and the origin of our strength as a people. In choosing life—especially when the alternative may seem easier—we cultivate our inner fortitude and our ability to persevere. Why do we push forward? Because we have no other choice. We have no other choice but to live.

⁵ *Deuteronomy 30:15-19*, The Hebrew Bible (Tanakh).

In Israel, a nation of over 7 million Jews, we witness firsthand a powerful example of what it means when a people's dedication to life is realized. Israel serves as a true case study in applying the Jewish value of choosing life. In 2023, in the UN World's Happiness Report, Israel ranked 4th happiest country in the world⁶. What? How is it possible that a country plagued with war, terrorism, suffering and pain holds the world record for happiest people? Israel is certainly not known for being peaceful, quiet, and politically stable like the other top contenders for the title.

Now, anyone who has been to Israel, or knows its people, knows that Israelis are known for many things. Walking around with smiles plastered on their faces isn't one of them.

However, according to authors, Dan Senor and Saul Singer, "The smiley version of happiness was not what the Gallup was trying to measure. The report aimed at a deeper construct: life satisfaction".⁷ When asked about "life satisfaction" Israelis consistently placed themselves higher and higher up the ladder.

Even with plenty of reasons to feel defeated, Israelis refuse to succumb to despair. They push forward, finding purpose in each day, grabbing life by the horns and pressing on.

In addition to self reporting on life satisfaction, research on Israeli society found that deaths of despair, deaths caused by suicide and drug overdose, were exceptionally low in Israel. In fact, when compared to all of the other wealthy nations in the OECD, Israel ranked lowest.

While some countries excel in fostering happiness, but not in reducing deaths of despair. Israel is exceptional in both.

And this, my friends, is truly remarkable. It's no accident. The Jewish value of choosing life is deeply woven into the fabric of Israeli society, and the results are profound. In choosing life, Israelis find the strength to persevere through despair, not just surviving but thriving. **Am Yisrael Chai**—the people of Israel, the Jewish nation, lives on.

The Jewish people live on not only because of an emphasis on "chai" on life, but because we have a shared destiny, a shared purpose. We are a people bound together in our fight for survival, united in our hope for a better future.

Unlike others, when the Jewish people are threatened, we do not crumble. Instead, we draw strength from our unity, from our peoplehood, and our resilience increases.

Dr. Jonathan Sarna, a prominent historian wrote the following in August, "Previous bouts of antisemitism going all the way back to ancient Persia spurred spiritual revivals. So did the rise of antisemitism in America in the late 19th century. That is what sparked the creation of so many

⁶ Helliwell, J. F., Layard, R., Sachs, J. D., Aknin, L. B., De Neve, J.-E., & Wang, S. (Eds.). *World Happiness Report 2023* (11th ed.). Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2023.

⁷ Dan Senor and Saul Singer, *The Genius of Israel: The Surprising Resilience of a Divided Nation in a Turbulent World* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2022).

innovative Jewish organizations, from the Jewish Publication Society to *The Jewish Encyclopedia* to Hadassah. The Holocaust, too, resulted in a very significant period of American Jewish renewal. And now [post October 7] it is happening again”⁸

In the year since October 7th, our people have come together across the globe, united in the face of tragedy, war, and rising anti-Semitism. This unity is evident in the increased involvement in synagogues, a resurgence in Shabbat observance, and the proud display of Jewish symbols through jewelry.

Just two weeks ago, *Tablet Magazine* published an article titled "*A Different Spin on Shabbat*"⁹, highlighting the creative Shabbat experiences that have emerged post-October 7. From Sababafest, a three-day music festival in New Jersey billed as “the happiest Shabbos of the year,” to healing-themed Shabbats in West Hollywood with breathwork and tea ceremonies, to the Shabbat Club in Brooklyn gathering over hummus and wine in chic event spaces, Jewish life continues to thrive. Grounded in community and a deep sense of peoplehood, we are not only surviving but flourishing.

Additionally, the popular Jewish nonprofit One Table, which empowers young adults to create peer-led Shabbat experiences with financial and educational support, has witnessed an unprecedented surge in participation since October 7. They reported a remarkable 105% increase in Shabbat dinners in the weeks following that tragic day, reflecting the deepening commitment to Jewish life and community during these challenging times.

In moments of crisis, our people come together, standing united against adversity. Knowing we are not alone gives us the strength to persevere. Together, we not only survive—we thrive.

Jon Polin, father of Israeli-American hostage Hersh Goldberg Polin, spoke these words at his sons funeral a few weeks ago. “For 330 days, mom and I sought the proverbial stone that we could turn over to save you. Maybe, just maybe, your death is the stone, the fuel that would bring home all the remaining 101 hostages. Od lo avda tikvatenu. Our hope is not yet lost”¹⁰.

Jon Polin, a father enduring the worst nightmare of his life clung to hope, even in the midst of unbearable despair. No one in their right mind would expect the parents of a murdered child to speak about hope in their eulogy. And yet, Jon did. Jon invoked something called, “chalutziot”.

Chalutziot, a term coined by the Zionist movement, comes from the word “chalutz”, commonly translated as a “pioneer”, derived from the verb “l’chaletz,” to extricate oneself, to pull out of a situation. It is the refusal to live inside an unacceptable reality.¹¹ Therefore, the

⁸ Jonathan D. Sarna, "*The Surge: As antisemitism rises, so does American Jews' connection to their Jewish identity and Israel*," JNS.org, 2024.

⁹ Flora Tsapovsky, "*A Different Spin on Shabbat*," *Tablet Magazine*, October 2024.

¹⁰ Jon Polin, speech at the funeral of Hersh Goldberg-Polin, *Times of Israel*, August 2024.

¹¹ *He-Halutz*, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*.

difference between resilience and chalutziot is the difference between surviving and thriving. Where resilience relies on the lessons and strength that come from our past, chalutziot draws us toward a better future.

This is what we, the Jewish people do. We hone our resilience muscles, and we use them to forge a better path forward.

On this Yom Kippur morning, I pray that we continue to carry forward the legacy of our ancestors, drawing on the DNA woven into our collective Jewish soul. May we pioneer ahead with courage and grit drawing strength from our unity. May we hold fast to our rich tradition of ritual, and may we never take for granted the sacred life we each have been given.

Our resilience will never cease as long as we have hope. Od lo tikvateinu, our hope is not yet lost.

[Hatikvah]

Benediction:

As we reflect on our lives and our history this Yom Kippur, let us remember that resilience is not simply surviving—it is growing through every challenge, it is learning from every hardship, and it is holding fast to the values that make us who we are. Through our faith, our traditions, and our peoplehood, we continue to move forward—resilient, strengthened, and ready to face whatever comes next.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah. May we all be sealed in the Book of Life, strengthened by the resilience that has carried us this far and will continue to carry us forward.