



WOMEN'S LEAGUE FOR CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

The Eikhah Project

5777

RESILIENCE A PARTICULARLY JEWISH QUALITY?

Introduction

Often, as Jews, we find ourselves asking how we have survived through many of the worst moments in our history -- the destruction of two temples and exile, the Crusades, expulsions, pogroms, the Holocaust -- not to mention relentless political and social marginalization and anti-Semitism throughout several millennia. What has enabled us, both literally and figuratively, to pick ourselves up over and over and continue?

This article provides a series of four different kinds of issues/events that require resilience: the destruction of Jerusalem; gender identity crisis; confronting the Holocaust] Full article, Appendix 1

In her article “*How People Learn to Become Resilient*” (The New Yorker, February 11, 2016) Maria Konnikova studies this particular phenomenon, citing works of many developmental psychologists. Although her focus is generalized, we as Jews understand that our continued survival has been, in large measure, contingent upon our resilience. And if we never thought about this before, this article helps us appreciate how this trait plays a significant role in our own lives, both personally and collectively.

General discussion question

How do you think that Jews have learned resilience through a very difficult history?

RESILIENCE PART I

The theories that started it all: The ideas of Norman Garmezy

Norman Garmezy was a developmental psychologist and clinician from the University of Minnesota who met with thousands of children over 40 years. His research was catalyzed by his observation of one young boy who came to school every day with the exact same sandwich: two slices of bread with nothing in between. A neglected child, the product of an alcoholic mother and an absent father, the boy wanted to make sure that “no one would feel pity for him and no one would know about the ineptitude of his mother.” And each day at school, he ate his sandwich and smiled happily at all those around him.

Garmezy went on to study this boy and others like him, who succeeded and even excelled despite difficult backgrounds. He is widely credited with being the first to study the concept of resilience in an experimental setting. He studied children who were adaptive and good citizens even though they had come out of disturbed backgrounds.

Garmezy observed that if you are lucky enough to never experience adversity, there is no way to measure your resilience, but if you are subjected to chronic adversity, you can learn resilience because the adaptations you make persist for many months. (*Maria Konnikova, "How People Learn to Become Resilient," The New Yorker, February 11, 2016*)

Discussion #1, Eikhah, Chapter 3 [Appendix 2]

1. This chapter focuses on two entirely different (and competing) themes. What are they?
2. To what does Jeremiah attribute his people's survival?
3. Are there any indications of the people's resilience?

RESILIENCE PART II:

Emmy Werner: How to Predict Resilience

Introduction

Emmy Werner, a developmental psychologist, in 1989 published the results of a 32-year project in which she followed almost 700 children in Hawaii from birth to their third decade of life. She monitored them for all kinds of stresses and discovered that not all at-risk children reacted to stress in the same way. Two thirds developed serious learning or behavior problems, but one third developed into "competent, confident, and caring young adults" because they made themselves ready to take advantage of new opportunities that arose.

She found that several elements predicted resilience. Some elements had to do with luck: a resilient child might have a strong bond with a supportive caregiver, parent, teacher or other mentor-like figure. From a young age, resilient children tended to "meet the world on their own terms. They were autonomous and independent, would seek out new experiences, and had a "positive social orientation." These children used whatever skills they had effectively, and they saw themselves as orchestrators of their own fate, despite the rocky start that they might have had.

Discussion #2: Gender Identity Crisis

As you read the following excerpt from "Justify My Love" by Daniel Boyarin what might Werner have said about Boyarin had she observed him as a child.

As I reflect on my coming of age in New Jersey, I realize that I had always been in some sense more of a "girl" than a "boy." A sissy who did not like sports, whose mother used to urge me, stop reading and go out and play, in fifth grade I went out for.... ballet. (Of course, I explained to the guys that it was a kind of sophisticated body building.) This is itself is rather a familiar story, a story of inexplicable gender dysphoria, but one that had for me, even then a rather happy ending. I didn't think of myself so much as girlish but rather as Jewish.

I start with what I think is a widespread sensibility that being Jewish in our culture renders a boy effeminate. Rather than producing in me a desire to "pass" and to become a "man," this sensibility resulted in my desire to remain a Jew, where being a sissy was all right. To be sure, this meant being marginal, and it has left me with a persistent sense of being on the outside of something, with my nose pressed to the glass looking in, but the cultural and communal place that a sissy occupied in my social world was not one that enforced rage and self-contempt. (pp. 17; *Best Contemporary Jewish Writing*; Michael Lerner, Ed. 2001)

1. How doe Daniel Boyarin confront his gender dysphoria (conflict between biological determination and actual gender identity)?

2. What role does Judaism play in providing resilience?
3. Does Boyarin see himself as orchestrator of his own fate?

RESILIENCE PART III

George Bonanno: Perception as a Means for Determining Resilience

A clinical psychologist at Columbia University's Teachers College, Bonanno studied resilience for 25 years, trying to figure out why some people could handle adversity better than others. He theorized that all of us possess the same fundamental stress-response system and that the vast majority of people are pretty adept at using that system to deal with stress. But when it comes to resilience, Bonanno wanted to know why some people use the system so much more frequently or effectively than others.

One central element of resilience, according to Bonanno, is perception. If a person conceptualizes an event as an opportunity to learn rather than as a traumatic event, then resilience appears. If a person can perceive the surprising death of a close friend as a way to construe that event as filled with meaning -- e.g. a greater awareness of a disease or closer ties with the community -- then it may not be seen as a trauma and resilience is much more apparent. In other words, living through adversity or an acute negative event doesn't guarantee that you'll suffer going forward. What matters is whether that adversity becomes traumatizing. (*Maria Konnikova, "How People Learn to Become Resilient," The New Yorker, February 11, 2016*)

Discussion #3: Confronting the Holocaust

In Moment Magazine (September/October 2016, pp 49-50), United States Ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro described the legacy of Elie Wiesel with the following words:

In my mind, Elie Wiesel's lasting legacy will be defined by four lessons:

First, the Shoah cannot be explained; rather, it must be grappled with. The Holocaust is almost unfathomable, given its scale, its brutality and its devastating impact on the Jewish people—and on humanity more broadly. Just as Elie struggled for 70 years to understand how the Holocaust was allowed to unfold, how one could believe in God in its aftermath, and how we could fail to prevent future genocides, we all must grapple with these questions.

Second, Elie left behind a tremendous legacy in terms of his Jewish identity and his deep and abiding sense of Jewish peoplehood. Born in Romania, imprisoned by the Nazis, a Holocaust refugee who moved from Europe to Israel to America, Elie lived in many countries, but his Jewish identity never wavered. He was Jewish through and through, and yet he also managed to be a full and active member of American and international civil society. Elie taught us about Jewish identity and Jewish pride, and also about the importance of being engaged in the world.

Third, Elie taught us about the critical role of remembrance and our collective responsibility in this regard. He was a leading force behind the establishment of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Elie was the museum's founding chairman and remained deeply involved for more than three decades.

Fourth, Elie taught us all to speak truth to power. As I was just becoming politically aware, his public stance on President Reagan's visit to the cemetery in Bitburg was a model for how to express dissent in an open society.

In Israel, Elie Wiesel is widely admired. He represents resilience, perseverance and the indomitable Jewish spirit. He also represents personal tragedy, and this is something that every Israeli feels. In some sense---in a collective sense---Israel is a nation founded by survivors and refugees from persecution and political violence. Israelis could thus relate his personal story to their own national narrative. His story, like Israel's, is a story of survival against impossible odds.

1. In what ways did Wiesel show his resilience?
2. Did he illustrate the kind of resilience that Bonanno talked about? Why?
3. Did Wiesel's ability as a chronicler of the Holocaust equate with Jeremiah's descriptions of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple?
4. Do you think that one or the other -- Wiesel or Jeremiah -- has more invested in the task of chronicler?

RESILIENCE PART IV

Martin Seligman: How Do We Learn Resilience?

A psychologist from the University of Pennsylvania, Martin Seligman found that training people to change their explanatory styles from internal to external (*bad events aren't my fault*), from global to specific (*This is one narrow thing rather than a massive indication that something is wrong*), and from permanent to impermanent (*I can change the situation, rather than assuming it's fixed*) made them more psychologically successful and less prone to depression. Cognitive skills that underpin resilience can be learned, thus creating resilience where there was none.

Seligman also realized that the opposite could be true. "We can become less resilient, or less likely to be resilient. We can take a minor things, blow it up in our heads...and drive ourselves crazy until we feel like that minor thing is the biggest thing that ever happened. (*Maria Konnikova, "How People Learn to Become Resilient," The New Yorker, February 11, 2016*)

Discussion #4: Confronting the Holocaust through poetry

In the following poem by Abraham Sutskever, a Yiddish poet who survived the Holocaust and the destruction of his family and his beloved Vilna, the poet asks how to react to the day of freedom, whatever that day is and whenever it comes? Like Eikhah which also means *how*, resourcefulness and resilience are valued for helping us to survive desolation and trauma.

How

How and with what will you fill
Your cup on the day of freedom?
In your joy, are you willing to feel
Yesterday's dark screaming.
Where skulls of days congeal
In a pit with no bottom, no floor?

You will look for a key to fit
The lock shivered in the door.
You will bite the streets like bread
And think: it was better before
And time will gnaw you mute
Like a grasshopper caught in a fist.

They'll compare your memory
To an ancient buried town
And your alien eyes will tunnel down
Like a mole, like a mole

1. What kind of resilience is present in this poem?
2. Is this the kind of resilience that Martin Seligman was observing?
3. Are we saying that we can be psychologically successful if we can think about the day of freedom and our future rather than the day of destruction described in Eikhah?