

THE RESILIENCE OF CRYING OUT

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by R' Hayley Goldstein, SVARA Fellow

I don't have a single relationship that wasn't changed, or at least challenged, by the pandemic. Discussions around podding, practices, and mask materials almost always devolved into bitterness and resentment for all parties. *Don't you trust me? We all asked. What, do you think I'm an idiot? You think I want to get covid?* Many things about human nature were illuminated by this pandemic. Our defensiveness, sure. And, yes, our resistance to change. But the one that sticks out the most to me is our ability to put

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up with extreme amounts of bullshit and annoyance to be close to each other. We will argue about whether wiping down groceries is necessary. We will process our hearts out about getting our groceries delivered vs. going into the store. We will fight about cloth masks and their effectiveness. Ultimately, we will do what it takes to be close to each other.

And here we are in Elul. A month of reflection, looking at our relationships and seeing what needs to shift. A month that begins the High Holiday wave of feeling our finitude, contemplating what we want to do with our short time on earth, how we want to live. What does Elul mean this year, when we have already spent the last 18 months in isolation, reflection, contemplating our short time on this earth, and (for many of us) having our relationships challenged and unwound through the pandemic? What does a month of reflection mean when it comes after 18 months of the kind of reflection normally reserved for this time? How might we relate to it differently than before?

We learn in Leviticus (13:45) about a person with *tzaraat*, usually translated as leprosy, some sort of scaly and highly contagious skin infection. The text says,

וְהִצְרוּעַ אֲשֶׁר-בּוֹ הַנֹּגַע בְּגָדָיו יִהְיוּ פְרָמִים וְרֹאשׁוֹ יִהְיֶה פְרוּעַ וְעַל-שָׁפָם יַעֲטֶה
וְטָמֵא אִ טָמֵא יִקְרָא:

As for the person with a leprous affection, his clothes shall be torn, his head shall be left bare, and he shall cover over his upper lip; and he shall call out, "Unclean! Unclean!"

On this verse, Rashi and other commentators explain that this person declares "Unclean! Unclean!" in order to notify people to stay back, to keep away from them. The Gemara (Chullin 78a) takes a different approach,

כדתניא (ויקרא יג, מה) וטמא טמא יקרא צריך להודיע לרבים ורבים מבקשים עליו רחמים וכן מי שאירע בו דבר צריך להודיע לרבים ורבים מבקשים עליו רחמים

As it is taught in a baraita: “And he will cry: Impure, impure” (Leviticus 13:45), that a leper must publicize the fact that he is ritually impure. He must announce his pain to the masses, and the masses will pray for mercy on his behalf. And likewise, one to whom any unfortunate matter happens must announce it to the masses, and then the masses will pray for mercy on his behalf.

This declaration, says our Gemara, is not to keep people away, but rather to draw people in. To get closer to people, emotionally and spiritually instead of physically, but closer nonetheless. While one could easily see a covid patient in our text, I think this text speaks to the pieces within each of us that have been struggling, lonely, in need of connection.

I believe the Rabbis in our piece of Gemara are prescribing a resilience practice for when we or those in our lives feel *tamei*/unclean/disconnected from the world. They are saying: Don't go away. Pull each other in. Let each other know. Pray for each other. Lift each other up. They are responding to the piece of human nature they understood so well, that we will do what it takes to be close to one another.

The word resilience is used so often that I realized I didn't really know what it meant. Resilience, I learned, is composed of two words: *re*, meaning back or again, and *salient*, meaning to leap or spring. An inside translation of the word resilience would be to leap again, to spring back or to use the 1824 scientific use of the word, “return to the original shape after compression.” This Elul, may we use the resilience practice our Rabbis prescribed us. May we continue reaching for each other through the darkness. We may not return to our original shape, but we can keep trying to leap again, continuing to fight to be close to one another.

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