RESILIENCE: THE MYSTIQUE OF JEWISH SURVIVAL

Reflections on 60 Years of Jewish Communal Service

By

Ted Comet

Honorary Associate Executive Vice-President of JDC and the Executive Vice-President of the World Council of Jewish Communal Service, New York

Although I deeply appreciate the gracious words of tribute from Elie Wiesel, Rabbi Berman, and John Ruskay, it does seem odd to be honored for doing something I have found so rewarding and meaningful. The reality is that I feel privileged that my career in Jewish communal service has enabled me to be connected to the major Jewish dramas of the past 60 years.

I had this feeling right from the start, when I went to France in 1946 as a student volunteer in a JDC-sponsored program to rehabilitate Jewish war orphans (that is where I first met Elie Wiesel). That experience, which was life transforming, elicited two powerful but very opposite emotions. On the down side, I came to understand the depth of destruction of the Holocaust; on the upside, I witnessed the extraordinary capacity of those orphans to respond to loving care and concerned handling. I learned then that it was possible to make a difference in the lives of others and that led me to seek a career devoted to healing and rebuilding.

If asked to associate one word with my 60-year experience, it would be RESILIENCE — the remarkable human ability not only to bounce back from defeat but to bounce back even HIGHER than before. Here are some examples of such resilience that still amaze me:

- In our orphan home, Elie Wiesel was part of a clique of four. What happened to the other three? One became a professor of astrophysics at the Sorbonne, a second became one of the world's greatest experts on the Provence language (early French of Rashi's time), and the third founded a modern yeshiva. Where did that resilience come from?
- There was a group of college-aged students whom JDC placed in a university in Italy. When I met them recently at a reunion at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, I found out that most had built successful professional careers. One became a world-class virologist who is a Nobel Prize contender and another invented the medical system that NASA uses in its shuttles, a system now in place in most hospitals. Where did that resilience come from? (It is painful to contemplate that, if these achievements came from random survivors, what was lost in the Holocaust – scholars, artists, scientists, perhaps the discoverer of the cure for cancer).
- In the DP camps in 1946 there was the largest birth rate in the world. JDC was besieged with requests for layettes. Where did that drive to respond to death with the creation of life come from?
- A cantor, now in Atlanta, related that he had lost everything in the Holocaust — his family, his hopes, his faith. When JDC made arrangements for a Yom Kippur service in his DP camp he was asked to officiate. He replied he could not as he lacked the necessary faith. He was told: "You don't begin to understand, we are no longer a *Minyan* of the living, but a *Minyan* of the dead and a *Minyan* of the

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dead has the power to exonerate. Now go and *daven.*" That was the turning point in his life.

Some later examples:

- During Operation Moses, in 1984, thousands of Ethiopian Jews who fled to Sudan were brought to Israel through a secret rescue effort. During a visit to an Absorption Center I picked up an 8-year-old and playfully swung him around. An alarmed *Madrich* (counselor) warned that malnutrition in Sudan had made these children's bones too brittle even for such mild play. In that aliyah was a boy named Sagi Avi Laicha. What happened to that frightened child from a backward village in Ethiopia, whose parents were illiterate and who had suffered from famine and flight?. He was placed in an Amit-sponsored youth village; made his way to the Gush Etzion Yeshiva Hesder program where he served five years in the army as a paratrooper; earned a bachelor's degree from Bar Ilan University and a master's degree from Brandeis University, and has just finished law school in Israel. He is fluent in Hebrew, Talmud, English, and Arabic, as well as Tigrinya and Amharik. Now, where did that come from?
- Here is just one story from the remarkable Jewish survival in the former Soviet Union. Among the 232,000 destitute elderly people receiving JDC assistance is a woman who had been a pilot in the Soviet air force during World War II. She was now homebound. Just before Passover she received, along with her regular food package, a box of matzot. When she saw the matzot, she began to cry, went to her closet and pulled out a quarter of a piece of matzah. She explained that this is what remained from the last box she received many years ago, and since then she has taken it out every Passover to put on her table as a way of celebrating the holiday. She was not the only one in the room in tears.

Moving from the individual to a community context, in Yugoslavia 60,000 of its 72,000 Jews were murdered in the Holocaust. Half of the survivors went to Israel. The remaining 6,000 were Tito-style communists. There was no rabbi, no functioning synagogue, no Jewish school, no one fasted on Yom Kippur, and the intermarriage rate was 90 percent. What would you say was the prognosis for its Jewish future? Today, there is a rabbi, a functioning synagogue, and a Jewish school, and people observe kashrut. Where did that renaissance come from?

Now we move to the large historic question: How were Jews able to survive 2,000 years of a frequently tortured exile? What was the source of that resilience; what sustained the belief in a Messianic age? I propose two contributing factors:

1. RETROSPECTION: Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik once said that today we are urged to look ahead, to plan for the future; in other words, to be prospective. We are also urged to look inward and be introspective. Yet, Judaism promotes a third way — that the purpose of our tradition is to make us retrospective — to look back at our past and extrapolate wisdom that can serve as guidelines for our future. As he put it so poetically, we should feel as if our forefathers are marching alongside us.
2. HANDLING TRAUMA: There is not a person or a society that has not suffered the experience of trauma. Do we let it paralyze us, consume us with anger, or retreat into victimhood? The common wisdom is that we should get over it, put it behind us and move on. There is, however a more profound response: that we should try to USE the trauma by transmuting it into creative energy. This is the source of all great achievements. Look at what extraordinary accomplishments Elie Wiesel created out of his pain.

Looking at Jewish history, we see how the Jews had the remarkable insight that al-

though they were vulnerable on the physical level, they still could carve out a terrain where they would be inviolate, where they could not be conquered – and that was the world of the mind and of the spirit. This led to the creation of an unparalleled intellectual phenomenon: 2,000 years of talmudic/rabbinic discourse and debate. About what? Essentially about one issue: What does it mean to live a significant and meaningful life. Now how do you explain the lasting power of that debate? Why does it still resonate for us today?

To answer that question I go back to when I was director of leadership development for federations and the primary question we grappled with was what motivates people. After all these years, I have come to the conclusion that if you peel away all the outer layers that differentiate one person from another, and you get down to the innermost core, you will find in every person a hunger for a sense of significance, a yearning that life has some meaning and purpose. Now how do we respond to that hunger? One way is to be attached to causes that are significant: causes that involve meeting the critical needs of others and that build caring communities and, on the larger scale, to be attached to the great historic drama of the Jewish people.

This was my wife Shoshana's message to our children, which she expressed most dramatically when she wove a tapestry for our son's Bar Mitzvah. Try to visualize a six-foot-tall tapestry with the Ten Commandments at the top. The sides of the tablets are not smooth, but jagged, as if they had been wrenched out of the rock of Sinai — symbolizing that life is not smooth, but often has rough edges and is sometimes wrenching. The letters do not remain fixed, static, or locked in the tablets, but fall out, comprising the priestly benediction: "May the Lord bless you and keep you." This blessing cascades over our son, who is represented at the base of the tapestry by a thick purple *kippah*, a double outline of his face — meaning he bows his head as he receives the blessing and he is covered by a *Tallit* shaped like wings to bear him up to Sinai. Her message: You stood at Sinai. And because Sinai took place in a desert and the desert is a metaphor for a hostile, non-nurturing world, our Jewish tradition commands us that no matter how rough the going, we must AFFIRM LIFE.

For my final example of resilience, I go back to my experience in France. In 1947 a group of older boys had joined the secret *Bricha* underground immigration to Palestine. While en route to the southern coast of Italy they were informed that the British had discovered their ship so they were rerouted to Rome. There they saw the Victory Arch that Titus built to commemorate the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. After hearing this story and how a coin was issued with the motto, "Judea Capta," intended for the eternal shame of the Jews, one of the older boys took a piece of chalk out of his pocket and scrawled at the base of the Arch: "Judea Viva"—The Jewish people live on.

One of the major concerns of old-timers like myself is whether future generations who will not have been shaped, as we were, by the Holocaust, the struggle to establish the State of Israel, and the movement to free Soviet Jewry, will also share our passions and commitments. Tonight, by honoring young leaders you are recognizing that there is a younger generation ready and able to carry on. Their presence affirms that Judea Viva—truly, we are and will remain, an eternal people.

JCSA Congratulates 2005 Young Professional Award Winners

Lisa Colton
Darim Online

Leonard Petlakh
Hebrew Free Loan Society, NY

Amy Wagner Biloon
United Jewish Communities

Through their commitments, dedication, and performance, they represent the highest values and exemplary service to the North American Jewish Community

Howard E. Charish and Joel Fox
Award Committee Co-Chairs

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