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**THE ROAD TO
RESILIENCE**

From Chaos to Celebration

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Chapter One

Chaos

“All that God desires from a person is his heart.”

Sanhedrin 106b

Grief at first feels like a state of chaos. Chaos, derived from the Greek word *khaos*, a gaping void, is a state of confusion, of being lost, without control. Once, in the pre-cell phone, pre-GPS era, I was driving with my four small children in upstate New York, and the directions to my friend’s home, which included the phone number, literally flew out the open window.

In the chaos of grief, you too may feel that your map has flown out the window. But it’s not just that you have no map: you are navigating dark and threatening terrain. You are lost, wandering, unable to see a way out or through or beyond. Your world has crumbled. The anguished encounter with chaos may cause you to despair and lose hope.

Poet Edward Hirsch says that “grief is like an invisible bag of cement that everybody is carrying on their shoulders.”

The Road to Resilience

All of us are one day stunned by the weight of loss and pain and despair. And understandably, most of us would like to flee from the chaos that accompanies trauma and bereavement. But allowing uncertainty and darkness may well be the first step toward resilience.

In this chapter, we will learn that when we permit ourselves to enter the chaos, to stumble and cry out, to surrender to our defenselessness, we may find that our pain leads us toward greater truth about both our vulnerability and our power in this world. Entering the chaos prepares us to receive a heightened clarity and wisdom as well as to engage in a more intimate relationship with God.

THE CHANGE OF CHANGE

This change in your life changes everything; you cross a line from which you cannot return to who you were. This isn't like painting the living room a different color or swearing that you will start that diet on Monday. This is The Change. The mother of all change.

You have suffered a change that alters the very system that you live by. No wonder you feel like your world is in chaos. You can't cope or figure life out anymore. You don't believe that anybody can help you, or even understand you.

Consider this, from an opinion piece written by a widow, which appeared in the *New York Times*:

One of the best pieces of advice I had came from a friend whose husband died suddenly. "Don't forget that you are you," she said cryptically. How right she was. She meant that I should not allow myself to be changed by my experience of grief.

I understand that this woman wants to hold on to her identity. Yet it is foolish to imagine that she would not be changed by grief.

When I graduated from high school, friends wrote in my yearbook: “Don’t ever change.” Might I have written that to others? Did I mean that we should stay the way we were when we were seniors in high school?

The only way to absorb catastrophe is to expect to change. Think of it, there are so many people who are in therapy, begging for change. So many people chase gurus or hike the Himalayas because they want change. Many seek charismatic teachers because they want to be transformed, renewed, healed.

Unfortunately, it’s difficult for people to make positive changes in their life, especially in a way that lasts. Rabbi Israel Salanter, a nineteenth-century rabbi who was the leader of a Lithuanian yeshiva, said that it is harder to change one weak character trait than to learn all sixty-three tractates of the Talmud. Rabbi Salanter stressed that a person had to work on becoming a more ethical, caring person. And that work is very difficult to accomplish because most of us resist internalizing and integrating change. But you have the opportunity to grow. Not just the opportunity. The obligation. And not just the obligation. The necessity.

So know this: resilience entails change. You’re not going to bounce back to who you were. Because of your encounter with loss, you are going to bounce forward to become someone you are not yet acquainted with.

ASTONISHMENT

Chaos defines the beginning of all change and creation. The Torah tells us that the world was created from a state of chaos:

“In the beginning of God’s creating the heavens and the earth. And the earth was desolate and void, with darkness upon the surface of the deep – and a breath of God hovered over the surface of the waters” (Gen. 1:1–2).

The creation story describes a world of *tohu* and *vohu*, desolation and void, emptiness. The world is engulfed in darkness, its surface covered with waters. There is no firm ground to stand on. You may be able to imagine what this feels like, because it reminds you of the shattering sense of anxiety and emptiness you experience when a person you love has died.

Surprisingly, the Hebrew word for this chaos of desolation and confusion, *tohu*, also conveys wonder. Rashi tells us that *tohu* is astonishment at the presence of emptiness: “For a person would be astonished and amazed at the void in it [the world].” In Rashi’s reading, the hypothetical observer perceives that what he now sees as molded and distinct was once without form or definition. What is might not have been. Instead of the something, there might have been nothing: no world, no nature, no stars and planets, no humanity, no magnificence. We contemplate a profound turbulent emptiness in the heart of the world. But instead of leading a person to despair, that intimate knowledge of contingency can spark a profound recognition of wonder.

Of course, when we are confronted with loss, it’s rare to believe in any wonder. In fact, disaster may threaten our sanity. I feared that I would not be able to bear the fracture of loss, that I would go mad. Losing Koby was a piercing pain that has lasted for years and will accompany me, in some form, for the rest of my days. And it wasn’t just missing my son and the cruelty of his death that toppled my equilibrium. It was also the fact that the world seemed murky and unpredictable and evil. Returning to life seemed as unlikely as standing on water.

The Talmud tells a story of men who journey to an island where they cook and share a meal (Bava Batra 73b). They are shocked when the ground below them begins to tremble. What they think is solid earth is instead a giant sea animal on which sand and grass have grown. When the huge fish suddenly flips over, the men are flung into the sea. If their ship had not been nearby, they surely would have drowned. Their footing is revealed to be shaky, temporary, turbulent.

When we are thrust into the desolation of chaos, we wonder how we will cope and survive. Even the word cope seems meager. We struggle. We wrestle with our pain. One bereaved mother described her experience as an earthquake. Another told me that she felt that her ego had been totally shattered. Booted from our habitual modes of comprehension and our routines, forced to find balance, we may feel totally unequipped to confront our new reality. We are alone, unsteady, trembling; the world may feel capricious, menacing, evil, and our sufferings feel arbitrary.

Yet, if you can allow the chaos, if you can bear the anxiety (often with the help of others), it may be the precursor to the shaping of a new self. While it may feel that your very being is dissolving, you may be undergoing a kind of alchemy, a transmutation of self that will one day invite and include the marvelous.

I am not saying that we should not argue with God, cry out, and plead with Him. Of course, we want only good things in our lives. And we don't want to grow as a result of anguish. The whole notion can seem cruel, almost sadistic. I would prefer to be a more relaxed superficial person with my son alive than be imbued with a profound sense of mission.

But in this suffering there is divinity. When we are in pain, we may not recognize God's presence. But even in the

shock, confusion, emptiness, and desolation, God's spirit or *ruah* hovers above us. Rashi compares this action to the hovering of a dove over its nest in a promise of protection. God hovers; He does not force Himself on us. But He does not abandon us.

SOMETHING FROM NOTHING

Psalm 126 is a psalm of hope that, in its final lines, recognizes the deep connection between emptiness and formation:

They who sow in tears will reap in song.
 Though he who bears the measure of seed goes on
his way weeping,
 He shall surely come home with exultation, bearing his sheaves.

When it feels that the earth that supported you has been irreparably overturned, there is a promise that new seedlings will one day take root and grow. We are promised a harvest when it seems improbable, when we cannot imagine growth. And this bounty stems from an act of sowing, which is seemingly a more random process than planting. When we plant, we take a seed or seedling and carefully, even gently place it in the ground. If it's a seedling, it's visible. We plant in orderly rows. We know what will most likely grow – the shape, the taste, the texture. We know what to expect.

When we sow, on the other hand, we scatter seeds into the dark ground. If you haven't sown that seed, you probably don't even know that it's there. You haven't put a marker in, written, for example, "green beans" and the date. You can't witness the early signs of growth. Sowing is a process of faith.

Regardless of the means of planting though, every seed has to disintegrate before it can grow into a fruit or vegetable.

Every seed has to break apart to sprout; it has to surrender to the darkness of mystery in order to emerge. That process can feel excruciating. But it is only when the seed turns to nothing that it can, in fact, become something.

Let me repeat that because it is such a stunning truth: *The seed has to turn to nothing to become something.*

How do we cope with the fear and pain of nothingness? By realizing that a crucial aspect of resilience is the ability to allow the darkness, to surrender, to pause there, to suspend our routine, to wait, to receive. We have to stop and allow the waves of pain. We sit and we question and we reflect and we cry. We dwell in a crucible of doubt and imbalance, emptiness, anguish. We are shocked into silence, as if we have returned to the watery depths of creation, before language.

Every birth includes this descent into the mystery of darkness. There are secrets that can be revealed only in the darkness. Those moments of obscurity, rupture, and incomprehensibility are the hallmark of bereavement, grief, mourning, and trauma.

A person who suffers may have to submerge in the anxiety of nothingness. If you don't enter the darkness, you may well never emerge. Poet Donald Hall terms a winter without snow in New England a psychic disaster: "The earth can't emerge because it never submerged." One has to undergo a process of decomposition in order to be reborn.

But how do we do so? What gives us the courage to confront the turmoil and emptiness? Psalm 121 may offer us an answer: "I lift my eyes to the hills, from where will my help come." From where (*me'ayin*) in Hebrew can also mean "from the nothing." Help will come from the chaos itself, from our consciousness of the nothing, of the void and abyss. In trauma, our psyche collides with non-being and discovers that it can tolerate the desolation. Moreover, as we dwell in the darkness

we learn that we can see, in the same way that we may see forms and shapes and color even when our eyes are closed. In the nothingness, there is a glimmer of something.

To be able to contain this truth requires deep humility and faith, surrender. It's almost impossible to believe that at the moment of dissolution, rebirth is actually beginning. Yet, it is said that on Tisha B'Av, the darkest day of the Jewish calendar, which marks the catastrophes that have befallen the Jewish people, the Messiah will be born.

We can't see the beginnings of growth: germination is an invisible, mysterious process. And according to the Talmud, "A blessing is present only in something that is hidden from view" (Taanit 8a). Concealment is the first stage in receiving blessing.

The Hebrew word for blessing offers us insight into this promise of rejuvenation. The word blessing, *berakha*, is related to *havrakha*, the agricultural term for the process that describes the rebirth of a grape vine. The vine must submerge, buried in the earth in order to re-emerge. Similarly, where it feels like we have been relegated to darkness, there is growth, fragile new roots forming.

You may feel that God and goodness are concealed from you. But there is blessing there waiting to be discovered, to be revealed. First one has to encounter the chaos, allow the pain and desolation to penetrate one's being.

STUMBLING

Everybody will tell you to be strong. But the key, as far as I have seen, is to give yourself permission to be soft and vulnerable – to allow yourself to stumble. It sounds simple but many people would rather just skip this step and stand strong. If I counted how many times people told me to "BE STRONG," I think I would get to over a thousand. But one young man told me,

“Guard your strength.” I think that advice was much more helpful.

Vulnerability is also a strength that we need to protect. Admitting vulnerability is not something we are taught or something that is valued. The source of the word *vulnerable* is the Latin word for wound. Being vulnerable means that we may reveal our wounds and our doubts and our fears. Most of us are not comfortable admitting fear or pain. Instead, we think we are supposed to be perfect, confident, strong, sure of ourselves. And when we aren't, not all of those around us can receive or appreciate our expressions of uncertainty. Yet vulnerability may be our deepest form of power. We have to choose when and where we express it.

As a speaker, I have learned the power of vulnerability. I lecture frequently about my book *The Blessing of a Broken Heart* as well as about the work of the Koby Mandell Foundation. I used to be afraid to speak because I feared making a mistake. But now, when I lecture, I know it's okay to be imperfect. If I forget where my speech was leading, what my next story was going to be, I ask the audience what my last point was. Everybody in the room seems to relax. I do as well. When I give myself permission to be vulnerable, the lecture is more honest, more immediate, more powerful – and the connection with the audience more potent.

Dennis Regan, a comedian who has appeared on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and in films, told me that some of the biggest laughs he gets are when he makes a mistake and flubs a joke, because the audience relates to him and feels empathy for him.

The Talmud teaches that one should be soft like a reed, not hard like a cedar (Taanit 20a). A reed bends beneath the storm without breaking. Flexible yet firm, the humble reed is privileged to be fashioned into an instrument for writing Torah scrolls, participating in holiness.

The reed teaches us that the ability to bend and surrender can lead us toward a more holy relationship with the world. When we relinquish our defenses, our usual postures, our habitual stance toward life, we may discover enhanced intimacy with others and with the Divine. Rabbi Isaac Hutner, a twentieth-century American *rosh yeshiva* and rabbi, cites the rabbinic aphorism, “One never gets the true sense of [literally, stands upon] the words of Torah until one has mistaken them [literally, stumbled over them]” (Gittin 43a).

When we stumble, we encounter the world and the words anew. Pushed out of our conditioned responses, we grapple with meaning. When we lose our stability, when we falter, we grope toward a tenuous but perhaps more authentic and vital standing, as we struggle to find our footing. Because we can no longer rely on habit or conditioning, we may experience truths about ourselves, about those around us, and about the Divine that were previously inaccessible.

Instead of being resentful and angry and bitter about the injustice or indignity of what we have to endure, we may discover that our vulnerability creates a more honest and urgent relationship with others and with God.

THE POWER IN VULNERABILITY

In Jewish texts, the Messiah, the redeemer who will bring peace to the world, is not described as a hero, but rather as a vulnerable person. In the archetypal Jewish story of healing, the Messiah is a wounded beggar waiting with the other beggars at the gates of the city:

R. Joshua ben Levi came upon Elijah the prophet while he was standing at the entrance of R. Shimon ben Yoḥai’s cave. He asked Elijah, “When will the Messiah come?”

“Go and ask him yourself,” he said.

“Where is he?”

“Sitting at the gates of the city.”

“How shall I know him?”

“He is sitting among the poor covered with wounds. The others unbind all their wounds at the same time and then bind them all up again. But he unbinds them one at a time and then binds it up again, saying to himself: ‘Perhaps I shall be needed. If so, I must always be ready so as not to delay for a moment.’” (Sanhedrin 98a)

The Messiah in this passage is not a warrior, but rather a vulnerable, wounded healer who can feel others’ pain. Unlike the other beggars, he is able to rise from his own pain to give from the place of brokenness. What distinguishes him, I think, is his responsiveness and alacrity. He sits at the gate, the portal to the city, wrapping his wounds one by one so he can leap when called.

It may be agonizing to touch our wounds or to be present when somebody else is suffering. Most of us don’t want to sit at the gates with the beggars applying bandages on oozing sores. We want to stay as far away from others who suffer as we can.

Pain threatens to unravel us. But remarkably, it is sometimes our wounds that bestow authority. In the Torah, Jacob struggles all night with a mysterious angel who wounds him in his hip socket, causing him to limp for the rest of his life. Yet the angel cannot vanquish him. Moreover, Jacob asks for and receives a blessing from the angel (Gen. 32:27–30). His name is changed from Jacob to Israel – he who struggles with man and the Divine and prevails. From then on, he is called by both of his names. In this way, God assures us that although we may be wounded and limping, eventually, our greatest struggles can

also become the source of blessings. We do not have to distract ourselves from our damaged places. Instead our struggles can become sources of vitality.

CALLING OUT

The Torah recognizes that there is a potent connection between defenselessness and a person's need to pray. In Hebrew the word for vulnerability (*pegiut*) is derived from the words for a blow or injury – but its less common meaning denotes prayer. When Jacob flees from his brother Esau who is intent on murdering him, he leaves his family in Beersheva and journeys alone to Harran. The text tells us that he encounters (*vayifga*) “the place” and spends the night there (Gen. 28:11). Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch translates the language of encounter, *vayifga*, as meaning that Jacob was struck by the place, a collision. Rashi, quoting the sages, tells us that the word *vayifga* also means “to pray.” Indeed, this encounter is regarded as the source of the daily evening prayer, that of the darkness when we are most fearful and it is hardest to see God's loving hand. When we collide with our own vulnerability, we may be urged toward the language of prayer. We cry out in our raw need.

So many people will tell you not to cry. But crying doesn't mean that you will break apart. On the contrary, it is the first, most essential step in mourning, in finding your elemental voice, in mending yourself.

Please understand that being brokenhearted does not mean being depressed. Depression is a black hole, a vortex that seizes us with a power from which we can't escape, a molecular sadness. But being broken is, in a way, the human condition. All of us will be broken at one stage or another.

We cry out because ordinary language cannot express the *tohu* and *vohu* of our experience, the chaos of our great

desolation. That primal cry, the inarticulate language of confusion and despair and hopelessness, describes the shocking encounter with the pain of the void, the despair at the seeming emptiness. In this cataclysmic reality, we call out for help, for our pain to lessen, for understanding, for connection to another world because only God can comfort us. But our cry is also necessary in order to arouse God's compassion.

In the Torah, it is only when God hears the Hebrew people crying out from their suffering as slaves in Egypt that He speaks to Moses and tells him that He sees and hears their suffering – He *knows* of their experience of pain – and will remember them and bring them out of their slavery. It is the people's cry that initiates the Exodus from Egypt, the return to Israel: the redemption (Ex. 3). God requires that we call to Him; and then He responds to our outcry.

CLOSURE AND DISCLOSURE

In the Torah portion of *Lekh Lekha*, God tells Abraham to leave his country, his birthplace, and the house of his parents, and journey to the land which God will show him. He has to leave behind everything he knows in order to discover his new identity and his connection to God. Vulnerable, he has to wander, to wait for signs.

Lekh Lekha means “go for yourself.” The chaos may well be the first step on your path of reshaping yourself. In our vulnerability and brokenness, God calls on us to go for ourselves. It can be scary to be dislocated, disorienting to abandon our past comforts and identity, but, as a result of becoming wanderers, we may find that we discover wonder in the world.

For trauma can be followed by disclosure. At Mount Sinai, when God speaks to the Hebrew people, a midrash tells us, their souls fly from them, but then the people experience a

sense of rebirth. After the smoke, the lightning, and the shofar blasts comes the giving of the Ten Commandments. The people's terror of annihilation is followed by revelation, statements of divine truth.

And something parallel may happen in our personal lives when we are struck by cataclysm. The trembling can be followed by insight, knowledge, and divine gifts. That revelation can come as a feeling of love or communion with everybody else who is suffering, a sense of purpose, or even acceptance of one's situation. It may be an understanding of the limits of this world, or a desire for contact with the World to Come, a longing to peek through the flimsy curtain separating worlds. It can be a greater belief in God or a greater compassion and generosity toward others.

What we most want to shirk, to change, to abandon, can be the centerpiece of blossoming that separates us from who we were, and transports us to a place where we can more fully realize our greater selves.

Therefore, it is a problem to think of closure as the goal of any grieving process. Most people understandably want to close the door on their pain. They want to finish with it. They want to return to the life that they had before. The word "closure" is mentioned almost immediately in the news broadcasts after any tragedy, after any grief. But closure is a fallacy. While we don't want the pain, it's important to understand that there is *disclosure* hiding there, something that waits to be revealed.

BEYOND THE DESOLATION

That is not to say that we invite suffering into our lives. In fact, Judaism teaches that we should not remain in the chaos of pain, and we should help others to exit this unbearable and dangerous territory. We can think of the chaos as being similar

to the top 848 meters of Mount Everest, known as the “Death Zone.” There, climbers can rely on only 30 percent of the oxygen found at sea level. They often become confused, and may find it difficult to sleep and eat. Their digestion slows. Wounds cannot heal. If a person stays there too long, he or she can lose consciousness or die.

Jewish law recognizes that the days following a loved one’s death are fraught with chaos. The bereaved are in a state of psychological frailty. For that reason, the bereaved have a different status of *aninut* until after the burial. They are not obligated to pray or perform other commandments because they are in turmoil; the chaos of death and pain threatens and topples their composure.

If a person remains in this unprotected territory of raw pain and need indefinitely, he or she won’t be able to heal. On the other hand, if a person doesn’t allow the trauma entrance, she or he may never recover.

Think of entering your suffering as being similar to diving. When I snorkel in the Red Sea, I am shocked by the brilliant colors of the schools of iridescent fish and formations of coral that are invisible from the surface. You may lose your bearings, you may fear that you are going to drown, but after the fear and trauma, know that, in the darkness, you will encounter sparks of beauty.

QUESTIONS:

- What did you learn about chaos as a child? In your home? In your school? In your community? In your own life?
- What does chaos say to you? Write one sentence that chaos seems to whisper to you.
- What can you respond to chaos? Write a sentence responding to chaos.
- Write about a time that you stumbled. What happened? Who helped you?
- What does it mean to you to be vulnerable?
- What is the difference for you between closure and disclosure?
- To whom can you cry out?
- How did your family of origin deal with grief?
- What did you learn about grief as a child? What did you learn in your school or community? What did you learn about it as an adult?
- What is your personal prayer for healing?