



Forging a Jewish Path to Resilience

By Dana Sheanin

Perhaps one of the most well-known pieces of Jewish wisdom is from *Pirke Avot*: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?” As I survey the landscape of Jewish education, it seems clear that these enjoinders are critically important right now.

As we confront a global pandemic, address deep economic inequality and wrestle with systemic racism, we are called as Jews – and as human beings – to do the difficult work of balancing self-care, and care for others, and asked to do both with a sense of urgency. The most critical step educational leaders can take today is to encourage teachers to deepen their focus on Judaism’s timeless lessons of character development. A subtle shift in our focus can meaningfully support the resilience of learners of all ages – from preschool through retirement.

He asserts that each of these building blocks is comprised of three key skills. These skills map beautifully to Judaism’s *middot*, the character virtues that the ancient practice of *mussar* encourages each of us to develop.

Recognizing what’s true about ourselves:

Dr. Rick Hanson, a psychologist and resilience expert suggests that personal well-being – the kind that enables us to harness the strength to care for ourselves and others – comes from four building blocks: Recognizing what’s true about ourselves, Resourcing ourselves to address what we encounter, Regulating our emotions, and Relating to those around us. If we can do these things, we are better equipped to leave the world better than we found it.

The first of Hanson’s building blocks asks us to consciously take the time to gain clarity about what is happening around and inside of us. This requires *Rachamim* (compassion, especially for yourself), *Chochma* (wisdom), and *Yesod* (mindfulness.) How might learning environments for children and adults feel different if we deliberately taught learners how to ground themselves, become more fully present to the learning environment, and actively draw on self-compassion when

things are hard? How might children relate differently to prayer, for example, if we approached it not from the vantage point of skill building but with the goal of getting quiet, taking stock and listening for the still small voice within?

Resourcing ourselves:

The second building block asks us to cultivate tools to help us persevere when we encounter challenges. These tools include *Netzach* (grit), *HaKarat HaTov* (gratitude) and *Bitachon* (confidence, or alternatively faith.) This is what we are teaching when we speak about creating a growth mindset. Such virtues are within our reach when we talk with learners about *brachot*, or when we begin or end class with gratitude for each other and our teacher. When we invite students to use sacred text to address current problems, or encourage them to test new ideas in supportive learning spaces, it is this building block we are stabilizing.

Regulating our emotions:

Since the onset of Covid-19, we've heard a great deal about the importance of social emotional learning for children in particular. The ability to identify one's feelings, in order to regulate one's actions is the hallmark of emotional well-being. Here, the first of Dr. Hanson's tools is *Menuchat Nefesh* (calm), the second is *Zerizut* (motivation) and the third is *Ahava* (love or emotional intimacy.) Why these? Perhaps the first is obvious. The calmer we are, the abler we are to choose a response, rather than simply reacting. For young learners, simply knowing this is powerful, and learning ways to calm oneself can be a game changer. What better invitation is there to teach meditation through a Jewish lens? At the same time, Dr. Hanson posits there are "two ways to get yourself up the mountains of life ... by drawing on the inner nurturer or the inner critic." Imagine the power of helping children learn – in spaces where they feel most at home – to call on their inner wisdom when facing a challenge, rather than their critical voice. Dr. Hanson's choice of love as the third building block speaks to the importance of empathy – without which intimate relationships are not possible. The Torah is rich with invitations to talk about how biblical characters worked to understand the point of view of another (or didn't!) Similarly, the teaching of *mitzvot* provides a chance to explore how empathy helps us to do right by others. Which brings us to our final building block.

Relating to those around us:

While the first three building blocks fall primarily into the territory of "if I am not for myself, who will be for me" the final one puts us on the path of "if I am only for myself,

what am I?" It is in this area, that Jewish education tends to focus, as we work to develop *menschlikeit*. The ability to relate skillfully to others – whether family or community members, friends, colleagues, or neighbors – is integral to our tradition's obligation to "be a blessing." We would be wise to remember however that only after we have developed our own resilience can we strengthen our relationships with others. Here Dr. Hanson suggests three final *middot* – *Ometz Lev* (courage), *Nedivut* (generosity) and *Shleimut* (wholeness or integrity). The obligation to be a blessing is undergirded by these character strengths. It is courage, generosity and integrity that we call on when we talk with students about standing up for what they believe to be just. It is our opportunity as their role models to show them that doing so enriches our sense of purpose, relationships with others, and ability to be pursue paths of peace.

Some may suggest that in light of the historical moment, turning toward personal resilience is a luxury we cannot afford. I believe it is essential. Adapting Dr. Hanson's building blocks to guide both what and how we teach will nurture the souls of our community's teachers and students, enabling each of us to recognize our common humanity and work to heal all that is broken in our communities.

And "if not now, when?" Sharon Salzberg, a Jewish teacher of mindfulness practice, writes in her recent book *Real Change*, "Acts of generosity and kindness are the vital, day to day, moment to moment channels of transformation." Using Jewish values as our foundation, may we all work to use each moment in the new year to bring such gentle transformation to ourselves, our students and the world.

Dana Sheanin is the CEO of Jewish LearningWorks, a Bay Area based organization that elevates the field of Jewish education by nurturing educators, inspiring innovation and promoting Jewish literacy. A companion piece on why Jewish education matters more than ever in the time of Covid was also published here this summer: <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/if-not-now-when/>

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