



Rosh Hashanah, Day One
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Stamina — When You Are in the Shadows
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If you had to pick the single most essential personal quality to be working on right now, what would it be? Let me place this question in a context by sharing three recent conversations.

One was from a beloved long-time member who really misses coming to services on Shabbat morning. She misses it so much that she has counted exactly how many Shabbatot it has been since she was last in shul. At the time we spoke, she had not been in shul for 25 Shabbatot.

A second was from a wonderful couple that told me how much they used to love the energy of coming back to services on Rosh Hashanah. They have had the same seats, in the same pews, near the same friends, for years. It just won't be the same this year, they observed.

A third was with a high school parent who shared their teen-age daughter, upon hearing that the Newton high schools will be all virtual this year, lamented that her high school experience has been, in her words, "ruined." She points to all the things that she used to do, has not done since March and will now not be able to do again for a full year, including not seeing her friends every day. Hence her dark verdict, ruined, and her father is at a loss for how best to love her through it.

All of us have our own version of these stories, of life disrupted, yet again, and with no end in sight. It is in that context that I ask the question: if you had to pick the single most essential personal quality to be working on right now, what would it be?

My colleague, Rabbi David Wolpe, quotes his late father, Rabbi Gerry Wolpe, as saying that the most important quality we can work on now is stamina because, in his father's words, *"You have to be patient or loving or good not once, but continually."* Rabbi Gerry Wolpe lived

and died before the pandemic. If his words were true before the pandemic, how much more true are they in week 28 and counting. Where do we go to get stamina?

I was speaking with Aliza about the best biblical example of stamina. I suggested Abraham. He famously experiences ten trials. After being called by God to leave all that he knows and go to the land that God will show him, Abraham experiences famine, wandering, the kidnapping of Sarah, the kidnapping of his nephew Lot, war with five kings to get his nephew back, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, prolonged infertility with Sarah, the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael, the command to sacrifice Isaac. Promised a life of blessing, Abraham instead gets a life of ordeals. How could he have survived all these ordeals? He must have had stamina.

To which Aliza responded: It is true that Abraham suffers and has to persist, but he is not the most helpful role model for the stamina we need to cultivate. After all, Abraham gets lots of props from God. God honors Abraham, picks him out of the mass of humanity, promises him to be the father of a covenanted people.

A better role model for the stamina we need to develop, Aliza pointed out, is Sarah. Sarah suffers right along with Abraham. When he wanders, she wanders. When he experiences famine, she experiences famine. He worries about her getting kidnapped by the Pharaoh, but she is the one in the Pharaoh's harem. He is pained by her infertility, but she is the one who cannot conceive. Sarah shares the suffering, but she gets no props. She lives in the shadows. And from those shadows she has to be good and strong not once but continually.

Most of us are like Sarah, not Abraham. The groundhog days we repeat, we repeat in the shadows. The disappointed children we console, we console in the shadows. The social isolation that pains us, we feel in the shadows. The endless zoom calls that fatigue us happen in

the shadows. No headlines. No glamour. No glory. No God coming down and saying I pick you. And still we have to be good and strong not once but continually.

The first thing that Sarah teaches us is that everybody carries something. Everybody carries some burden, and they usually carry it a long time. Through the years. Sarah carries her infertility. All she wants is a baby. She can't have a baby. She wakes up with this pain every single day for years.

Everybody carries something, and they carry it for a long time, and whatever they carried just got worse in the pandemic. If we carry loneliness, our loneliness got worse in the pandemic. If we carry financial stress, our financial stress got worse in the pandemic. If we carry health challenges, our health challenges got worse in the pandemic. If we carry adult children trying to find their way, that got harder in the pandemic. The pandemic is not great either for career advancement or finding your life partner. If we carry elderly parents, especially if they are widowed, if they live alone, that got harder in the pandemic. Like Sarah, we wake up every single morning carrying our burdens.

And that means, like Sarah, we will have days that are not our finest days, we will have moments that are not our finest moments, we will do things that we are not proud of, we will feel feelings that we wish we did not feel. Sarah is harsh to Hagar when Hagar gets pregnant, so harsh that Hagar has to run away. Sarah is harsher yet to Hagar when Ishmael is born, ordering Abraham to banish them both. I always struggled with these moments of Sarah. She treated Hagar and Ishmael shamefully. But encountering these moments now, in week 28 of the lockdown, a different aspect pops out: Even the best of us will have our worst moments. True for Sarah. True for us.

When Sarah dies, this is how the Torah records her death: “*Sarah’s lifetime—the span of Sarah’s life—came to one hundred years and twenty years and seven years.*” The Torah could just say she died at 127. Instead, the Torah goes slow here. 100 years and 20 years and 7 years. Why draw it out? Rashi’s answer: She retained the innocence of a 7-year old when she was 20, and the beauty of a 20-year old when she was 100. In other words, Sarah had stamina. Something in her allowed her to carry what she had to carry, and to let go of her bad days and bad moments, so that she could be good and strong not once but continually. What was it?

Rereading Sarah’s story now, in this season of pandemic, I think her secret sauce was that she made her peace with imperfection. There are no perfect people, only imperfect people. There are no perfect marriages, only imperfect marriages. There are no perfect journeys, only imperfect journeys. There are no perfect days, only imperfect days. There is no perfect relationship with God, only an imperfect relationship with God. The basic ground rule of life is imperfection.

It is as if God says to everyone of us, in the womb, the moment before we are conceived: *you sure you want to do this? Life is many things. It is fabulous. It is wondrous. There are sunrises and sunsets to take in, books to read, symphonies to hear, wine to drink, fine meals to eat. There is love. There is learning and growing. There is the joy of becoming an ever better version of yourself. But you need to know one thing. There is also pain. Pain every day. Pain everywhere. That pain goes with. So are you sure you want to come into existence: to inherit a world that is sublime and wondrous and beautiful and full of pain that never goes away, all at the same time?*

Sarah answered that question yes. And she inherited the glory of life--and its imperfection. She married a husband who was a spiritual pioneer--and a zealot. She went on a

journey that was full of impact--and danger. A beautiful life, and an imperfect life. True for Sarah. True for us.

The secret to stamina is to get, at a deep level, that the pain always comes with, **and** life is beautiful, at the very same time. If we can say yes to that, we can become good and strong not once, but continually. *Shanah tovah!*