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Before I became a rabbi, I worked in managed health care. I started in marketing and got promoted into operations. It was heady stuff for a twenty-something. I was just so proud of the work I was doing.

One Friday afternoon, my boss showed up at my office door and casually asked if I could join her in her office in a few minutes. Upon arriving there, I discovered that the VP of Human Resources was sitting in the other visitor's chair. That's not good. They got to the point quickly: my job was being eliminated. That was the bad news. The good news: they had another job for me, at the same pay with the same benefits, in a different department.

I held it together for the remaining hour of the day and then started crying on my way home. I didn't really stop crying until it was time to make the commute back. I cried off and on for the entire weekend. I was crushed.

Yes, I still had a job, and for that I was grateful. I was financially dependent on that job. And, at the same time, it was wildly painful to discover that the role was not needed any longer, and the projects I was working on were going to be scrapped. It was demoralizing to learn that something I had prided myself on doing could be discontinued so suddenly and with so little warning. Was my work really that meaningless?

The silver lining in this dark cloud was that it provided me the impetus to make a major change in my life. When people ask, "where did you get the courage to leave your existing career to go become a rabbi?", that experience figured into it. When I looked at what I wanted out of life, I knew that at least part of the answer was, *not that.*

But what happens when it's your dream job? Or worse: what happens when you've devoted your life to some aspect of increasing the common good, and then, suddenly, you discover that there's no agreement about what *good* is? What happens when you fall down the rabbit-hole like Alice in Wonderland and suddenly, everything has changed?

In the listening circles for federal employees, we heard about their sense of dislocation because of the work of Project 2025 and DOGE. It's not just the threat of job loss. It's not just mourning all the talent that has left. It's also the disagreement over basic principles, as if the whole government was reflected in a fun-house mirror. It's stuff like refusing to let people refer to organizations with "climate change" in their title, even in the footnotes, even when it's needed for accuracy, to account for the origins of the data, because of a pre-

existing dislike of the phrase "climate change." It's also actions like firing people under false pretenses and then accusing them baselessly of misdeeds because the numbers weren't what the leader wanted to hear.

Moral coherence is the idea that what you do makes sense in the world: that you can take actions that are good and helpful and meaningful, and that these actions will matter. We know, because they have told us, that one of the goals of Project 2025 and DOGE has been to demoralize federal workers by creating a hostile work environment. It's an intentional destruction of the sense of moral coherence.

The philosopher John Rawls defines liberal constitutional democracies as follows:

> [They] are both reasonable and rational, and their rational conduct, as organized and expressed in their elections and votes, and the laws and policies of their government, is similarly constrained by their sense of what is reasonable.[1]

In other words, to be a modern liberal constitutional democracy is to aspire to be reasonable, well-ordered and just. That's what we, the United States of America, have aspired to be in the past—even as we often fell short—but that's not what's happening in our federal government right now.

Can our Jewish tradition be helpful to us in this moment? In John Rawls' structure, traditional Judaism would qualify as an example of "a decent hierarchy." Jewish law is concerned with enacting human rights broadly speaking, but those rights are specifically distributed according to a hierarchy. It would be better, of course, if they were distributed equally.

Modern liberal Jewish thought, such as what we find in Reform Judaism, takes this traditional structure one step further with the intent to create what Rawls would call "a reasonable liberal people." By this we mean: not only do we follow the rule of law and observe human rights, but also, we value equity and equality.

But we do look to our tradition for how to frame our response when we're not sure how to proceed. Not surprisingly, Jewish law worries a lot about whose claims you should believe. Here's an example of how that kind of deliberation often unfolds:

> The Talmud relates the story of **a certain** man **who said to** those present at his deathbed: **My property** should go **to Toviya.** The man **passed away,** and **Toviya came** to claim his possessions. **Rabbi Yoḥanan said:** [the] **Toviya** [we were looking for] **has come,** and there is no need to be concerned that [the deceased] might have meant a different Toviya.

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[1] John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Harvard University Press, 1999), 24-5.

In other words: when there's no dispute, it's fine to go with the commonsense answer. You don't need to delve further.

> The Talmud adds: If the deceased had **said:** My property should go to **Toviya, and Rabbi Toviya came** forward, it is assumed that this is *not* the person the deceased had in mind, for **he said:** My property should go **to Toviya. He did not say:** My property should go **to Rabbi Toviya. But if** Rabbi Toviya is **a person who is familiar with** the deceased, [meaning that they were good friends] then it can be assumed that the deceased called him by his personal name and not by his title because **he was familiar with him.**

As you see, even in the ancient times, there were people who would call a rabbi by their first name, but it was much more common to include their title as well.

What we learn here: When there's no dispute, *but* it's not clear how the information should be used, you should use your powers of deduction and then decide how to proceed.

> If **two** men named **Toviya came** forward, and one of them was the deceased's **neighbor** and the other **a Torah scholar** but not his neighbor, the **Torah scholar takes precedence.** Similarly, if one was **a relative and** the other **a Torah scholar, the Torah scholar takes precedence.**

That may surprise you: you might think proximity should matter. But the point here is that when there's a dispute, go with the person with greater authority and learning, even if the other one claims to have an inside connection. You should respect scholarship and expertise in forming your opinions, according to the Talmud, rather than anecdotal evidence from someone who claims to have direct knowledge.

Or to put it another way: if your physician says, "get this vaccine" and someone who is not a physician, like say RFK Jr., says, "do not get this vaccine," you should listen to your physician and get the vaccine.

The text continues:

> **…** If **they** were **both relatives, or both neighbors, or both scholars,** there is no systematic way of determining who is entitled to the property, and the decision is left to **the discretion of the judges.**[2]

When there's a dispute and both sides present their case with equal authority, then you're going to have to dig into the case and think through what's true and accept that discretion is part of the decision. When that happens, you should be less sure about this situation, because it's not obvious who is right. Note also that the matter is ultimately given to experts, the judges, to decide.

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[2] BT, Ketubot 85b (Koren-Steinsalz, with small changes to the language to make it more easily understood).

What had been in place regarding vaccine recommendations, for example, was a collection of experts who made these decisions, to make sure that individual interests did not subvert the common good. We can, from a Jewish point of view, be appalled that the neutral judges were replaced by individuals with weaker credentials and stronger ideologies. We can, using Talmudic logic, suggest that the judges of such decisions need to have genuine expertise.

What's appealing about this Talmudic text, and by extension, what's appealing about our Jewish legal tradition, is its sense of moral coherence. Disputes can be managed. The rule of law takes hold. Each side presents its case, and it gets decided based on its merits. That viewpoint may feel naïve in this new era of "might makes right," but it's the very foundation of being a just people. Our tradition demands it.

What do we do, then, when reasonableness is under attack, and when the idea of a shared common good has frayed? How do we face this situation with endurance and resilience?

In her research-based work, *Shatterproof: How to Live in a World of Constant Chaos*, Tasha Eurich identifies three things that we need to thrive amidst this kind of chaos: confidence, choice, and connection. By "confidence," Eurich means "the belief that we're effective in our actions, capable of achieving our goals, and able to grow and learn new things."[3]

If your work is a source of chaos in your life, it is possible to develop confidence from activities that are outside of your work. Remember how, during the pandemic we all learned how to bake sourdough? That was an example of building confidence to increase resilience. Do that, or something like that. Learn how to play tennis or how to embroider or take up singing. We're all going to need deep resilience to resist this ongoing degradation of our national discourse. You can help by building your confidence.

Similarly, by "choice" Eurich "means feeling free to function without pressure or threat, acting with agency and integrity, and staying true to ourselves."[4] That's what is missing in government jobs right now: many of our federal employees are reporting feeling a sense of pressure and threat. But, as with the case of confidence, a sense of choice need not occur in the career space to be helpful for building our sense of resilience. As Eurich explains, "Whether it's through selecting a fulfilling career, leaving a toxic relationship, or advocating for a meaningful cause, choice helps us feel authentic, aware, and aligned as well as purposeful, empowered, and engaged."[5]

Not all forms of choice are good choices, however. Doom scrolling on your phone also activates a feeling of choice because you are the sovereign lord of that space. But it's a hollow victory. If you feel like you're spending way too much time scrolling on your phone

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[3] Tasha Eurich, *Shatterproof: How to Live in a World of Constant Chaos* (Little, Brown Spark, 2025), 92.
[4] Eurich, *Shatterproof,* 93.
[5] Eurich, *Shatterproof,* 93.

as a coping mechanism amid our national chaos, that could be a sign that you need to expand the range of choice in your life. You might not yet be in a place to make that change, as this moment is indeed difficult, so be gentle with yourself. Even so, knowing why you are doom scrolling might be enough of an impetus by itself to break the cycle.

Eurich also points to the need for "connection," which she names as "the sense that we belong, get along with others, and experience mutual closeness and support."[6] Pets can also help: that's why there were so many pet adoptions during the pandemic. I would be remiss if I did not also mention here that involvement at Temple Micah is a great source of connection. We are here, as your community, to support you. Volunteering at Micah, in fact, can be a way to tap into all three sources of resilience all at once. I recommend it!

I would also suggest, in addition to Eurich's trio of confidence, choice and connection, a fourth strategy for resilience: that is prayer. I am aware that there are politicians out there who will offer up thoughts and prayers in place of engaging in action and legislation. That's not what I mean here. We should not retreat into navel-gazing spirituality. Rather, as Abraham Joshua Heschel argues, Jewish prayer is intended to be the first step in enacting the vision of the prophets. *Prayer implies action.* We're expected to heed the prophet Micah's admonition to do justice, love goodness and walk humbly with our God—prayer enables us to identify what it means to do justice, love goodness, and walk humbly with God.

But why prayer, exactly? Couldn't we just move on to the action part, without the need for prayer? Yet: there's a reason why 12-step programs for addiction ask you to envision a higher power. At moments when you are feeling lost and helpless, it is life-affirming to recognize that there's a power in charge of the universe. It helps reestablish that sense of moral coherence. Right is right, wrong is wrong, and no amount of cynicism or nihilism is going to undo all of that.

The moments when you are finding it hardest to believe in God may be the moments you most need to pray.

Let me give a personal example: the year that I divorced the father of my child, in my fourth year of rabbinical school, I felt really lost. That year, I made the decision to attend every worship service in the school's chapel available to me, even though I just wasn't feeling it. I was feeling estranged from God, even as I was studying to be a rabbi. Sitting the chapel at services felt both like an extravagant waste of time *and,* at the same time, like the very life-raft that was keeping me afloat in turbulent waters. I never forgot that experience; I learned a lot from it. Our tradition has long said that the prayer of the broken-hearted is the one most likely to be heard and heeded.

That muscle memory of praying while in distress makes it easier to find solace when things looked awful. It offered me then what I needed most: a structure for admitting that I was

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[6] Eurich, *Shatterproof,* 93.

not in charge here, and a reminder that things could happen that were out of my control, but even so, a reassurance that there was still such thing as moral coherence in the universe. It's helping me now, to counter-act that ever-present desire to doomscroll and fall into despair. *Prayer is a source of hope.*

To our federal employees: we see you, we support you, and we believe you. What you had been doing, in the course of your work, has been both necessary and good. Thank you.

It's going to be a long trek back to the place of reasonableness, and we'll need to cultivate a whole lot of resilience to get there. But we can do this, together.

May we, together, enact our vision for a better world.