

The Human Resilience Project Shares Lessons for Rosh Hashanah

Constance Scharff, PhD – Rosh Hashanah 5787 (2026)

Temple Beth Sholom, Salem, Oregon

L'shana tova u'metukah.

OK, so you may be wondering who's this woman standing here this morning? Some of you might have seen a "welcome" article in the bulletin about me recently. You might just think I'm new to the community. But, for those of you who have been members for awhile, and by "awhile," I mean 40ish years or more, it's possible that you remember me. In August 1984, I stood on the bimah of the old shul on Broadway and told you in my bat mitzvah speech that I planned on becoming a veterinarian. The next day, we had a party out at my mom's ranch in Scio—and BTW, my mom is the religious school director, Pearl Bettman—at which Ruth Ashkenazie wore a fabulous red cowboy hat and Gil Feibleman won the barrel racing at the mini-rodeo we hosted.

Surprise! I did not, in fact, become a veterinarian. While I still love animals, euthanizing them, even when medically appropriate, is not something I have the stomach for and that was the end of that.

So what did I end up doing? Before I wanted to be a veterinarian, I dreamed of being an anthropologist who traveled the world learning about people and writing books to share what I learned. To that end, I became the first person in the world to earn a PhD in transformative studies—the study of change—and I now travel the world combining anthropology, psychology, and consciousness studies, examining

The Human Resilience Project Shares Lessons for Rosh Hashanah

Constance Scharff, PhD – Rosh Hashanah 5787 (2026)

Temple Beth Sholom, Salem, Oregon

nonwestern mental health practices and writing award winning nonfiction books about what I learn.

Gretchen Shoshana asked if today I would share more about my research into mental health, and if possible, relate it to the Torah or Haftarah readings. Well, since a lot of mental health concerns are rooted in trauma, and traumatic experience permeates Torah, that shouldn't be too difficult a challenge.

Let's look at the parsha first. Sarah is barren, so Hagar, her servant, has a child with Abraham to perpetuate the line. Now while we use the word "surrogacy" to describe what happened, this is not surrogacy in the modern sense where genetic material is moved between people in a clinical setting. Abraham has to lay with Hagar until she's pregnant. Of course, because Hagar is Sarah's servant, usually the child would belong to Sarah and be heir to Abraham, but Sarah never accepted Ishmael as her son and he was raised as Hagar's child. This becomes problematic when Sarah bears her own child, also a son. Sarah finally bore Isaac, when Ishmael was **14**. Sarah knew that Ishmael was a threat to Isaac as heir—and we're going to see a LOT of second sons supplanting first sons throughout the Torah—so to protect Isaac, and because she simply doesn't like Hagar, Sarah demanded that Hagar and Ishmael be banished. Abraham obliged.

The Human Resilience Project Shares Lessons for Rosh Hashanah

Constance Scharff, PhD – Rosh Hashanah 5787 (2026)

Temple Beth Sholom, Salem, Oregon

Hagar and Ishmael traveled in the direction of Be'er Sheva, where they ran out of water. Dying of thirst, Ishmael cries out while his mother sits in the distance, heartbroken and unable to watch her son die. God hears the boy's cries and saves them both, with an angel who shows them a well. The story is all tied up with a bow; but while that's nice and all, you can be absolutely certain that RAGE, resentment, and hate were cemented in the boy's heart.

In the Haftarah, Hannah weeps because she's barren and begs God for a child. Her suffering is exacerbated by her co-wife, Peninnah, who has children and taunts Hannah mercilessly. The high priest sees Hannah praying and thinks she's drunk, that's how passionate her prayer is, but when he realizes how desperate and intent she is, he promises that she will be blessed. Hannah conceives Samuel and brings him to the high priest to be in service to God. Samuel becomes a prophet who anoints first King Saul, then King David, a very important life indeed.

In both stories, we see people in distress who cry out for help. They have no social standing and may be barely audible as they pray, or they may be quite loud. It would be easy to dismiss their suffering or even fail to see it. Hagar and Ishmael were isolated in the wilderness and Hannah seemed out of her mind. As the stories unfold, we do not know whether these cries will be answered. The stories would be very different if no help came. The example given to us, the moral of the stories, is to

The Human Resilience Project Shares Lessons for Rosh Hashanah

Constance Scharff, PhD – Rosh Hashanah 5787 (2026)

Temple Beth Sholom, Salem, Oregon

answer the call for help. That is precisely the work of The Human Resilience Project.

I founded and serve as principal investigator for The Human Resilience Project or THRP. Early in my career, before the THRP, I worked in the field of addiction and trauma treatment—and I’m going to tell you something controversial. We have VERY GOOD information about how people can recover from addiction and we are gaining more effective treatment methods for trauma. We could have better treatment outcomes, but for a complex and tangled set of reasons, we don’t implement what are known best practices in most treatment facilities in this country. Saying more about that is beyond the scope of this drash, but living within that clinical reality motivated me to pivot.

Instead of continuing in addiction research, where there’s a disconnect between investigation and practice, I began learning about non-Western mental health practices. Presently, I learn with and from communities that address mental wellbeing in ways vastly different than mainstream practices here. Instead of looking at what’s wrong with us, for example, I started to look at what’s right—what’s best in our inner lives and communities. This is different from much psychotherapeutic practice, which has a tendency to rehash what’s wrong. These changes in research orientation have profoundly changed the ways I conduct research and how I share what I learn.

The Human Resilience Project Shares Lessons for Rosh Hashanah

Constance Scharff, PhD – Rosh Hashanah 5787 (2026)

Temple Beth Sholom, Salem, Oregon

Before I go further, I want to outline a spiritual principle that underpins THRP. I do not believe, in this epoch, that we experience overt divine intervention, the way we see it in the Torah. As in the story of Esther, I believe that we are the actors in our lives. That doesn't mean that HaShem doesn't hear our cries, but it means that we are God's hands and feet. I see suffering and am called to act. We don't wait for God to intervene, but are given the opportunity to stand in for the angel who directs Ishmael to water. We are the ones who make the world a better place, or don't.

My current investigation is a 10 nation, 3-year project visiting some of the most remote communities in the world that are experiencing extreme stress due to conflict and/or climate change. I just returned yesterday from my third expedition, this time to Nome, Alaska, to learn from the Iñupiat. After the High Holy Days, I will go to Paraguay to learn from the Guarani. As a member of the Explorers Club, an organization founded in 1901 to support and expand scientific field research, I have been given the honor to carry Explorers Club Flag #12 and a Rolex watch, on these expeditions. The watch connects the project to the Rolex Perpetual Planet Initiative. Our first two expeditions to learn with and from the Gabra of Northern Kenya and the Māori of Aotearoa/New Zealand, were featured in the *Explorers Journal* and *Explorers Log* respectively. I am looking at vastly different communities in all parts of

The Human Resilience Project Shares Lessons for Rosh Hashanah

Constance Scharff, PhD – Rosh Hashanah 5787 (2026)

Temple Beth Sholom, Salem, Oregon

the planet to find out what is common between them and applicable across cultures, so that low cost or no cost activities to bolster psychological and spiritual wellbeing can be used by those most in need. In the end, I plan to write a popular press book to share the findings, so that people anywhere can have access to the information for the cost of a book or better yet, with a library card. It's a major investigation.

What are the preliminary findings? You may be surprised to learn that a great deal of what helps Indigenous communities weather hardship is also what helps Jewish communities remain strong in challenging times.

1. Connection to place and one another – We rise or fall together.

You know this experience. Someone is being accused of a horrible crime and then you hear the name—Bernie Madoff, Jeffrey Epstein—and your heart sinks when you recognize it as clearly Jewish. Whether we like it or not, whether we are more or less observant, no matter what your thoughts and feelings about Israel, we are Jewish. If you didn't feel that connection to your Jewish identity, you very likely would not be here in services this morning.

Every expedition THRP has undertaken, with the Gabra in Kenya, the Māori in New Zealand, or the Iñupiat in Nome, has taught me similar lessons from different angles: no community survives on individual resilience, will, or effort alone. The elders who hold a tribe's stories, the

The Human Resilience Project Shares Lessons for Rosh Hashanah

Constance Scharff, PhD – Rosh Hashanah 5787 (2026)

Temple Beth Sholom, Salem, Oregon

mothers who hold its children, the knowledge keepers who hold its wisdom against all forms of hardship, all of them have a role. Remove too many and like Jenga, the structure collapses.

This is the architecture of Jewish peoplehood too. We are not a collection of individuals who happen to share a liturgy. Despite what some people may shout, our connection to one another is not solely through religion. We are “am Yisrael,” a people. We are a single organism whose health depends on every cell doing its part, whose suffering registers everywhere at once, because there is no membrane separating one Jew's fate from another's. Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh, all of Israel is responsible for one another. This expression is not poetic flourish; it is a description of how we actually function. Am Yisrael, this people, our people, by historical accounts should have vanished into history centuries ago. And yet we persist. This is the same principle that has let every fragile community I have studied endure what should have broken it.

Connection and mutual responsibility is perhaps one of the most important of the resilience factors I'm finding is common to communities around the world. We have it too. I am reminded often of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl, who was murdered in Pakistan in 2002, whose final words included, “My father is Jewish; my mother is

The Human Resilience Project Shares Lessons for Rosh Hashanah

Constance Scharff, PhD – Rosh Hashanah 5787 (2026)

Temple Beth Sholom, Salem, Oregon

Jewish. I am Jewish.” Our Jewishness matters. It is our link to one another.

2. Sharing – No one is allowed to have nothing so that others can have unusable amounts of anything.

Among the Gabra, sharing milk and meat across households is not generosity, it is refusal: a refusal to let one family sit alone with an empty bowl while the rest of the community eats. The Iñupiat name this practice directly, *Pikkaagupsi Aitturalui*, literally meaning sharing, and it emerged as one of the clearest resilience themes from our Nome fieldwork. I got to Nome at the start of moose hunting season: the moose is harvested, butchered, and distributed; the elders are fed, as are all members of the community. Full stop. No one asks whether they can afford to eat. Everyone receives. Nobody considers the act charitable. They are simply unwilling to be warm and fed while someone nearby is not, nor will they hoard an unusable amount of food when others have little or none.

Judaism built the same refusal to accept extreme poverty into its architecture. The kibbutz collectivized not only because collectivism was efficient, but because no member should wake up wealthier **in spirit** than his neighbor. The moshav kept private lots, but pooled the burdens of the harvest so that one farmer's bad year would be shared together,

The Human Resilience Project Shares Lessons for Rosh Hashanah

Constance Scharff, PhD – Rosh Hashanah 5787 (2026)

Temple Beth Sholom, Salem, Oregon

rather than his alone. The Jewish free loan society lends without interest so that need is met as need and never priced as a transaction with a winner and a loser, where interest is taken from someone already on the brink. The rabbi's discretionary fund exists because some pain is too private for a committee to vet and too urgent to wait for one. None of this is charity in the sense of surplus handed downward from those who have to those who lack. We have communal responsibility for one another just as we do for this building, but our people are more important because we are alive.

Think back to each summer's commemoration of Tisha b'Av, when the whole community sits on the floor together and reads Lamentations aloud rather than let each mourner carry Jerusalem's destruction alone. Suffering shared is easier to carry.

Sometimes suffering can be prevented or alleviated. Sometimes it must be endured. But one should not and need not be isolated in that suffering. Our responsibility to one another and sharing between neighbors was there in the shtetl and it is here on Rosh Hashanah morning.

There is an old Hasidic story that illustrates this point. A shoemaker's wife went into labor on a bitter winter night, and the family had no wood left for the stove and no money to buy any. The shoemaker ran to the

The Human Resilience Project Shares Lessons for Rosh Hashanah

Constance Scharff, PhD – Rosh Hashanah 5787 (2026)

Temple Beth Sholom, Salem, Oregon

rabbi, who had already given away every coin of that week's tzedakah and had nothing left to offer. So the rabbi did the only thing available to him: he walked with the shoemaker to the house of the richest man in town and knocked. The rich man, annoyed at being pulled from his warm bed, threw on a robe and ran barefoot down the stairs to open the door. He peaked out the window to see the rabbi and the shoemaker on the doorstep. He opened the door, ready to hand over a small donation and go back to sleep. But the rabbi refused to step inside. He kept the rich man standing on his own threshold in his bedclothes, in the same cold the shoemaker's family was suffering through, until the rich man himself said the words: it is awfully cold outside. Only then did the rabbi ask for the money.

The rabbi understood that the rich man might not meet the need unless he felt how the shoemaker suffered. We are asked not to give from our comfort, but to feel and alleviate the need. The kibbutz, the moshav, the free loan, the rabbi's discretionary fund, all of it exists downstream from the idea that a Jew who is warm has no standing to decide, from inside his warmth, how much another Jew's cold deserves. You go stand in it first. This is what the Gabra do when they will not eat when the neighbor has no food and what the Iñupiat do when the moose, or walrus, or caribou is shared. It is not generosity calculated at a distance, but a refusal to let distance exist in the first place, because once you have felt

The Human Resilience Project Shares Lessons for Rosh Hashanah

Constance Scharff, PhD – Rosh Hashanah 5787 (2026)

Temple Beth Sholom, Salem, Oregon

the cold, letting someone else stand in it becomes unconscionable rather than merely uncharitable.

3. Humor: If You're Not Laughing, You're Crying

The Māori, and I suspect most Pacific Islanders, value humor. They laugh and joke, especially using witticisms and gentle chides, even in serious circumstances. Māori, humor is not always simple joking, but defiance. It keeps injustice and grief from curdling into bitterness. Gentle chiding can be a way of keeping community members in line or reminding them of the consequences of poor decisions. Humor maintains connection and can make the expression of difficult feelings more manageable. Further, laughing is a biological, biochemical release that helps us feel better.

Jews also use humor, in Yiddish and in English. Old World Jewish comedy and Yiddish theater ran on the current of seeing the light in hardship. The badchen, a literal jester who mocked wedding guests, the Purim-shpil that traditionally turned the year's worst hardships into a play often performed by children, the shtetl humor born of the pogroms that produced Sholem Aleichem's comedies, in a style known as “laughter through tears,” was all meant to transform suffering into lightheartedness. “They tried to kill us. We survived. Let’s eat!” is the

The Human Resilience Project Shares Lessons for Rosh Hashanah

Constance Scharff, PhD – Rosh Hashanah 5787 (2026)

Temple Beth Sholom, Salem, Oregon

heart of distilling hardship into a celebration of life. Whether Māori or Jewish, we refuse to let others take our capacity for joy. A people mocked from the outside who can still playfully joke about themselves from the inside has kept something those doing the mocking cannot touch.

4. Gratitude

Before I move on from discussing some of THRP's preliminary field results, I want to touch upon gratitude. If you woke up on this side of the dirt, you have **something** to be grateful for. Not everyone will make it through this day. The deep experience of gratitude is resonant in every community that shows strong resilience.

On Wednesday, I was interviewed by the editor of The Nome Nugget, the oldest newspaper in Alaska. The reporter said she wanted to push back against my optimism and asked me how I could be positive or hopeful in such challenging times. She didn't know I am Jewish, but there is no question that for Jews, these are challenging times, and there is every possibility that they could get worse, for us and for those around us.

Let me just say this as someone who has studied mental health, specifically addiction and trauma, for nearly two decades. Whatever you emphasize grows. If you worry, your worries grow. If you think about

The Human Resilience Project Shares Lessons for Rosh Hashanah

Constance Scharff, PhD – Rosh Hashanah 5787 (2026)

Temple Beth Sholom, Salem, Oregon

what's wrong, your anxieties grow. BUT, if you focus on what's good and what's right, that's what you amplify. If you get out and do for others, your gratitude grows. Think of the hunter who hears the elder say, "Thank you," when he delivers meat. It's hard to feel bad when you uplift your fellow.

I saw a man outside the grocery store in Nome, a young man, tall and thin, carrying a single grocery bag of an exceptionally petite elderly woman. She barely shuffled as she walked. The wind was blowing almost to gale levels and we were all being blasted by sand. The smile on this man's face as we crossed paths was as broad as it could be. Everything about the day was uncomfortable, but the way that woman held the man's elbow showed his value to her and the community as a whole.

Gratitude isn't only for what's beautiful or abundant, it's also for what we can give.

So where do we go from here? How do we apply these findings and what can you do to improve human resilience in yourself, this community, and in our broader global connections?

Rosh Hashanah asks us for an act or acts of renewal at the head of the year. The introspection and teshuva (return) took place in Elul. Not to worry if you didn't do the homework. This is the start of the Days of

The Human Resilience Project Shares Lessons for Rosh Hashanah

Constance Scharff, PhD – Rosh Hashanah 5787 (2026)

Temple Beth Sholom, Salem, Oregon

Awe, so there is still time to consider, but not too much, because renewal and return are both **actions**. The Days of Awe call us to act, and to continue acting in ways that bring about renewal through the shutting of the gates at the Neilah service on Yom Kippur, and into the new year.

OK—I wouldn't be human if I didn't do a brief, self-serving pitch. The Human Resilience Project is at present entirely self-funded by my not very deep pockets. No money, no mission. Also, I want to include Israel in the research and because of current political realities, there's no funding for that. If you are moved to make this work happen, please speak with me after the Holy Days. We are looking for sponsors. And, while money makes the mission happen, if money isn't what you can offer and you want to be involved, please follow me on social media and share the cause with others. THRProject.com

In addition, or if this particular project is not how you're moved, take action in the ways that you are interested. If you enjoy being involved with young people and Jewish education, there are probably opportunities that Mom—Pearl Bettman—raise your hand, Mom—can tell you about. I know she's still looking for one teacher for K-1 children. Or there are volunteer opportunities that come available with some regularity on the board. There is always fund raising to be done. There are people in our community who need food and community gardens and food banks that support them. There's Helping Hands and

The Human Resilience Project Shares Lessons for Rosh Hashanah

Constance Scharff, PhD – Rosh Hashanah 5787 (2026)

Temple Beth Sholom, Salem, Oregon

Habitat for Humanity and Scouting and CASA and senior living facilities that welcome musicians to play music to the residents and prison or immigrant literacy programs or anything else your heart desires.

One thing I love to do is grow vegetables and share them with others in the community. You may not “need” three homegrown tomatoes in the literal sense, but it sure is nice to be gifted. Mom makes a blueberry jam that you’ll be lucky to receive. Read to children at the school or library. Make a quilt for those who have lost their homes to fire or flood. Learn to weave. Paint. Provide professional services to those who can’t afford them. This room is full of lawyers, physicians, and accountants who can share their skills. **You have something** to give this community—both TBS and the extended connections around us. What holds you back?

As we conclude: there is a structural supposition underneath the concepts of human resilience as THRP investigates it, and that is that resilience is the capacity for renewal and hope that becomes evident BECAUSE there is disruption, discord, hardship, and even evil, in life. Climate disturbance and conflict are the equivalent to the barrenness we hear about in the Rosh Hashanah stories. Life brings hardship and despair in many forms to all of us. The question we ask now, thousands of years after these stories were first told, is the same—not to ask whether hardship will come or to try to avoid it, but to find the capacity

The Human Resilience Project Shares Lessons for Rosh Hashanah

Constance Scharff, PhD – Rosh Hashanah 5787 (2026)

Temple Beth Sholom, Salem, Oregon

for renewal and transformation that already exists both in individuals and the community. We don't have to manufacture hope; we simply need to recognize it.

I call my team and the people we work with “Hope Slingers.” I see the bad, the suffering, the hardship, the injustice. I seek it out in that I look for it on the news and in the communities that share their experiences with me. I do not turn a blind eye to it, and yet, that is not where I live. Human resilience, overcoming in the face of trauma, is about CHOOSING where to place our attention. Yes, things could get a whole lot worse. We know what that looks like. And still, I will work for better. I ask you to do the same. The story of renewal, the hope of Rosh Hashanah, is not only individual, but of creating a tipping point. We are HaShem's hands and feet. **We** make the world better. We tip it toward helpfulness and connection, or we let it fall into despair. Action is the difference. Your choice matters.

It is my fervent hope that you choose to bring sweetness to this new year and to remind yourself that you've committed to that sweetness when you become discouraged and falter. Again, you choose.

L'shana tova u'metukah.