

Stronger Together
Erev Rosh HaShanah 5780
Rabbi Yoni Regev
Temple Sinai – Paramount Theater

Hin'ni—Here I stand before you, one of little merit. These are the powerful words that opened our service tonight as we stood before the ark and professed our inadequacy to represent the community before God. These words—*Hin'ni be-ani mi'maas*—have been present and echoing in my mind for weeks and months now as I have been preparing for these High Holy Days. It is an awesome responsibility to stand here before you and offer words that may adequately address the gravity of this moment.

This is a time that calls for moral clarity and spiritual authority, and to be honest, I feel *ani mi'maas*—of little merit when it comes to tackling the enormity of the crisis of character and conscience that we face in this world.

Drawing up the strength to face the task at hand I have been reflecting on the path that led me to this place, and a significant moment stood out in my mind. When I first came to study in college in the US after my army service in Israel, I was quickly approached by the staff at the Hillel on campus. They had learned that I had some experience in leading services in Israel and that I spoke Hebrew and played some guitar, and they wanted to know if I would agree to lead the Reform Shabbat services on campus on a regular basis. I was honored and thrilled to have the opportunity to share my passion and gain experience in leading services.

Allow me to paint the scene for you of that first Friday night: there I stood, a 22 year-old freshman in college, in front of the group assembled for the egalitarian Shabbat services in the cavernous sanctuary of the campus Hillel. I stood behind a grand podium before a crowd of a dozen or so students, many of whom were my freshman dorm-mates whom I'd invited and incentivized with a promise of a free dinner afterwards. I welcomed everyone and launched into a medley of songs and prayers with which I was familiar from Jewish summer camps and my synagogue in Israel. My enthusiasm was met with mumbled responses and a deep yawning chasm of discomfort.

Everything about the experience felt terrible, and I couldn't quite figure out why. All the pieces of the puzzle seemed to be in place. It was Shabbat, we were in a sanctuary, we had prayer books, we had comfortable seats, we had a prayer leader, and we had assembled a community. Why then did this Shabbat service feel so dispiriting instead of uplifting?

The more I thought about this, the more I realized the last piece of the puzzle was the most important of all. It was true that a small group of young people had all assembled in that sanctuary, but I had done nothing to make us into a community. I had tried to replicate the mood and feel of my favorite prayer experiences, without considering what made our gathering unique. I thought that I could simply lead those people in prayer, but I did not yet know how to bring them along with me on that journey.

Being in community—even for one night—requires looking around and acknowledging who is with us, allowing room for what they each bring along with them: sadness and loss over the memory of a loved-one, fear and pain due to an invisible illness, joy and pride over the birth or accomplishment of a child or grandchild, bewilderment and questioning over the course of events in the world. Being in community means more than just sharing a space—it means sharing a connection—however tenuous and brief.

Here at Temple Sinai, we emphasize and celebrate the importance of community. We treasure our diversity of opinions and backgrounds, the tapestry of our cultural heritages and ethnicities. We strive continuously to live up to the ideals of inclusion, access, and acceptance that inform our core values, because we know that we are stronger when we stand together. We are stronger when our hearts unite. We are stronger when we feel invested in the wellbeing of those who surround us here on this holy night.

This is manifest when a member of our community is sick or in mourning after the loss of a loved one, when members of our community make a point to reach out and extend a supportive hand, a shoulder to cry on, or a hot meal to ease the strain. How much the better that we can also share in the joys (and occasional frustrations) of raising our children and welcoming them into the warm embrace of our heritage and covenant. To see those young hearts and minds transformed from innocent toddlers to complex and informed young adults, and on.

This is a communal enterprise in which we all hold a stake. Even if you have never shared the joys of a Hebrew School carpool or a Preschool Practice Shabbat, you can draw strength from this investment in the future of our community and the future of the Jewish people.

In our tradition, we are intentional in the ways that we recognize the annual cycles of time, and mark special occurrences each year. Some of these are obvious and well known—here we are on *Rosh HaShanah* marking the new year with festive services and the blast of the Shofar—but a less known custom takes place about five times during each year when we mark the completion of reading from each of the five books of the Torah with a unique expression—*Chazak, chazak, v'nitchazeik!*—Be strong, be strong, and let us be strengthened!

We chant these words out-loud after the last *Aliyah* on that Shabbat and on *Simchat Torah* when we conclude the reading of the book of Deuteronomy.

It is a small celebratory exclamation punctuating and marking a special occurrence, but its roots and meaning are worth exploring. In the Babylonian Talmud, tractate B'rachot (32b), which explores many of the ancient roots of our prayer customs, the Rabbis raised a concern about the best way to strengthen the resolve of people to remain engaged in prayer.

They suggested different ways one might benefit from a *Chizuk*—a strengthening or bolstering when their minds might otherwise wander from the act of prayer. Having adequately discussed this issue, they turned in their customary stream-of-consciousness manner, to other things in this world that might benefit from a little *Chizuk* as well.

They scoured their internal encyclopedic reference libraries for any mention of the word *Chazak* in the Hebrew Bible, and they came up with the following four things that require bolstering or strengthening in this world, and they are:

Torah, Maasim Tovim, Avodah, v'Derech Eretz—

Torah, good deeds, prayer, and acts of common decency.

For each of these, a biblical proof is cited: From where is it derived that Torah and good deeds require bolstering, they asked and responded— As it is stated in the instruction to Joshua: “*Rak chazak v'ematz me-od* - Only be strong and be extremely resolute, observe and do all of the Torah that My servant Moses commanded you...” (Joshua 1:7). The rabbis helpfully decoded for us that in this verse, *observe (chazak)* refers to Torah study and *do (v'ematz)* refers to good deeds. And so on it went for each of the sources.

I don't have the same kind of biblical references to back myself up, but I have certainly felt many moments in the past year when my own spirit needed some additional bolstering. Shortly after the last High Holy Days, when we learned about the heinous act of terror and hate that took the lives of fellow Jews in their place of worship in the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, I was sickened and brokenhearted.

In response, our congregation's leadership had to engage with the harrowing calculus of what it would take to keep us all safe in our own sanctuary. I felt dispirited, not only for having to contemplate the unimaginable, but because the necessary security steps we have taken have meant that we can no longer keep our doors open wide to welcome in the stranger as we had previously done in accordance with the prophetic inscription above our doorway, that it should serve as a house of worship for all people.

This despicable act of hatred was not an isolated incident, but a leading indicator of a trend we can no longer ignore. Across this country, and in many places around the world, hate-speech and intolerance are on the rise. Extremists of all stripes have found ways to connect online and spread their hateful ideologies, which have been stoked and nurtured by leaders who are intent on dividing our nations, and pitting groups against each other for the sake of their own political gain. On every continent on earth, refugees from wars and natural disasters are seeking a safe harbor and finding locked gates instead.

If the past year has proven anything, it is that old forms of hatred and scapegoating of the ‘other,’ like anti-Semitism, racism, Islamophobia, and xenophobia, were never fully eradicated, and they were ready and waiting to spring up from beneath the rock they were hiding under. Biding their time to come out into the sun.

These are profound issues that will require a multigenerational effort to change our discourse and push back against hate wherever it may be found. This will not be an easy task, and it will require us to exhibit strength and resilience over time. And while we may feel powerless as individuals to stem this tide of intolerance, I have good news for you—we are stronger together, and together we can push back.

In a recent book titled *Futureproof: How to Build Resilience in an Uncertain World*, Professor Jon Coaffee examines several disturbing contemporary and future global trends, and tries to offer a framework for societies to address them. He explains that “the need for resilience in an array of possible disruptions is everywhere we look. It has moved from being something that we need in extraordinary conditions to something we are expected to have all the time. The exception has become the norm.”

Ultimately, Coaffee concludes his book with a quote attributed to Charles Darwin, who said, “In the long history of humankind (and animal kind too) it is those who have learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively that have prevailed”¹

How then do we work together to build up our resilience as a community?

Dr. George Everly, Jr. a professor of Psychology at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine and their School of Public Health refers in his research² to a very similar quote from Charles Darwin,

¹ Per Coaffee: Some have attributed this quotation to Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859), and some to *Descent of Man* (1871) although some dispute it as a Darwin saying at all.

² George S. Everly, *Building Resilient Communities in Times of Adversity*, Psychology Today, (2 January, 2018), <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/experts/george-s-everly-jr-phd-abpp>.

which alternately states that “cohesive communities were resilient communities, and resilient communities were those deemed most sustainable” (Darwin, 1859).

Everly’s research shows that communities impacted by violence, terrorism, war, and disasters, have revealed several overarching factors which appear to buffer or protect against adversity. Among them, he is most intrigued by the question of social cohesion.

In his inquiry, Professor Everly wonders, “if indeed the observations of Darwin are correct, that cohesive communities are resilient communities, then how do we foster increased social cohesion, specifically in the wake of adversity?” I would like to highlight three of the seven elements that Everly identifies as important in this regard:

1. **Connectedness** – meaning the desire and ability of subgroups within the community to communicate with one another.
2. **Commitment** – referring to a shared commitment to pursue what is in the best interest of the broader community (over individual agendas).
3. **Collaboration and Cooperation** – an affirmative integration of connectedness, leadership, communications, commitment, and shared values.

If this all sounds overly complicated and theoretical, or else, perhaps obvious, or redundant, you are right to think so. Because these are essential lessons that our tradition and heritage have learned long ago. Throughout our history, when Jews were persecuted minorities in far flung corners of the earth, we learned to stand together and draw strength from one another.

These days we may draw strength and resilience first and foremost from the members of our immediate community who surround us here tonight, but we also have the opportunity to widen the circle of support to include all those who have been made to feel *other* in our world.

We cannot afford to stand by and pretend like this cresting wave of intolerance is an aberration or a temporary product of our times. We cannot afford to simply wait for things to go back to the way they were, because that is simply not good enough.

Now is the time for us to stand together and say, *chazak, chazak, v’nitchazeik* – be strong in the face of intolerance, be strong in resisting the forces that seek to normalize hate, and we will be comforted and strengthened by standing together as a community of communities devoted to hope and action.

I have come a long way since those first days in the campus Hillel. And though I must admit that I am still prone to overenthusiastically launching into medleys of songs and prayers, I have learned a vital lesson along the way: being in community means more than just sharing a space—

it means sharing a connection—sharing a purpose—and sharing a commitment and hope for the future.

Alone, I still feel like I am *ani mimaas* – of little merit and little power to make a difference, but together we are comforted, bolstered, and strengthened as we enter this New Year.

Chazak Chazak, v'Nitchazeik.