

All Kinds of Strong

Rabbi Keren Gorban

Kol Nidrei 5783

Temple Beth El, Tacoma

Little Ellie was so excited to finally be old enough to go out with the sheep to be their shepherd. For years Ellie had watched the older kids---siblings and neighbors---argue over the duty, trying to avoid the responsibility and the hours of isolation and boredom. But Ellie couldn't wait to be out in the meadow for hours, to have a chance to play the flute and to enjoy the peace and quiet.

That morning, the older kids were arguing once again about who had to go out with the sheep. This time, little Ellie jumped into the fray: "I'll do it." The big kids were stunned into momentary silence. David, the oldest, was the first one to recover. "You can't do it," he said. "You're too young. You wouldn't know what to do if something happened." The other kids chimed in, "And you're too small. The sheep won't be able to follow you." "And don't forget how sick you've been. You'll never be able to walk all those miles and climb those hills." "And what happens if a big, bad wolf comes? He'll eat you up first!" With that, Noa, one of the other big kids, pounced and tackled Ellie to the floor.

Struggling to push Noa off, Ellie was indignant. "I'm not too young. I'm the same age you all were when you began to go out with the sheep. And I'm not too small. The sheep know me better than they know any of you and they'll follow me anywhere. And I'm not too sick. I'm just sick of being cooped up at home like the chickens. And wolves don't scare me any more

than any of you!" With that, Ellie gave Noa a hard shove, stood up, and ran out of the house, grabbing the flute off the shelf by the door.

Ellie ran straight to the sheepfold to let the sheep out for their day of grazing. The sheep bleated and nuzzled in greeting while Ellie counted them as they left the pen. For the better part of the glorious morning, Ellie led the sheep through the countryside until they reached a grassy hill. While the sheep grazed, Ellie took out the flute to play and think.

Suddenly there was a slight change in the air. Ellie looked up, scanned the flock and noticed a little sheep wandering away—right towards a wolf. But the wolf wasn't even looking at the sheep. Instead it was ready to pounce and looking right at Ellie's brother, David. The fear in David's eyes was clear, even from a distance. Ellie had to act quickly.

Ellie grabbed a few pebbles and ran swiftly and silently toward the wolf. Crouching behind a bush, Ellie threw one of the pebbles at the wolf and blew sharply into the flute. Momentarily distracted, the wolf looked away just long enough for David to seek cover. Ellie threw another pebble and gave a loud shout. This time the wolf turned to face the sound. David got the idea, picked up a pebble at his feet, threw it, and gave another shout. When the wolf turned, Ellie ran to hide behind another bush before throwing another stone and blasting into the flute. Again and again, Ellie and David threw pebbles at the wolf and shouted from different places. Finally, the wolf, fearing that it was surrounded, backed away and fled.

At the end of the day, when Ellie and David got home with the sheep, David turned to Ellie and said, "You saved my life today. When I saw that wolf looking at me, I just froze. But you knew exactly what to do to scare

it away. I may be bigger than you, I may be able to walk further than you, and I may be able to pick up a stubborn sheep, but none of that mattered when the wolf looked at me. Now I know—there are all kinds of strong.”

There are all kinds of strong. There’s strength of body and strength of mind, strength of spirit and strength of heart. Our character can be strong, as can our moral compass. Likewise, our talents, skills and interests give us strength in various ways. What seems to be a liability in one context can actually be a strength in another. David may have been physically strong, but Ellie had the strength of mind and spirit to defeat the wolf and save David and their flock. Meanwhile, Ellie’s small size and quick thinking may have tempted the other kids to teasing, but they were put to good use when brawn couldn’t help. And although David’s physical strength didn’t serve him well on this occasion, the strength of his love and newfound respect for his little sibling allowed him to acknowledge the lesson he had learned. There are all kinds of strong.

And not only are there all kinds of strong, but each one of us is strong in our own unique and essential way—no matter our size, shape, IQ, physical ability or disability, sex, gender identity or expression, or skin color. Our varied strengths give color to our own lives and are essential to the healthy functioning of our community. We need to be strong in different ways; that heterogeneity is part of what makes communities strong.

So, what is strength? Strength, according to the dictionary, is the ability to withstand or overcome great force and pressure. First, notice that this definition focuses only on our own abilities, not anyone else’s. Our own

strength exists regardless of how it compares to that of others. Nor does it require or expect any particular physical fortitude. Not all pressures or forces are physical, and sometimes shows of muscle indicate weakness in other ways.

Ellie may not have been the biggest or brawniest kid in the neighborhood, but nevertheless had strengths that the others did not. And the older kids showed insecurity and weakness when they belittled and tackled Ellie, not strength. Instead, strength—real strength—is what's left when artifice and ego and facades are swept away. In many ways, strength is matter-of-fact, the way David acknowledged his strengths and Ellie's strengths without trying to claim that one is ultimately better than another. Strength is about who we are and what we can do.

One of the ways we show how strong we are is by *withstanding* great forces or pressures. So many of us are under incredible pressure, from work or school, from family and friends, and from various groups, organizations, or activities that demand our presence, time, and money. Our responsibilities and obligations to others, even when we have chosen those commitments, can weigh us down and become burdensome. We may love what we're doing and not want to give it up, but that doesn't change the reality of the pressure.

Then we have the pressure we put on ourselves to meet expectations, whether our own or from external sources. TV, books, movies, and magazines set standards of happiness and success that are unattainable for most people, yet it can be difficult *not* to compare ourselves to those standards. It gets worse when we see the curated posts and profiles on

social media that might lead us to think that we're the only ones struggling. The force of that pressure is enormous despite our knowledge that we are not scripted or curated. And then there are the simple comparisons with others we know or our own sense of what we should be. Just to be here, in spite of all of those pressures, is itself a feat. And while some of us might need to work on loosening up our perfectionist tendencies or scaling back the frenetic pace at which we live our lives, we also need at least a little bit of pressure to improve and grow and learn. It's how we hone our strengths.

On the other end of the spectrum, we have to withstand a variety of pressures that lead us astray and lead us to do wrong. Who among us hasn't fallen to the temptation to tell small lies about why we were late or who ate the last cookie (although in my house, growing up, it was who ate the last banana)? Who hasn't stolen in little, innocuous ways, like claiming that a child is younger than they are in order to get discounted pricing or by downloading music or movies for free from unofficial sources? And who hasn't shared even a minor secret from someone else or gossiped about people we know in order to be liked or to gain status? And those are only some of the small, everyday sins. With only minor consequences—if any at all—for these sins, we likely don't even recognize how often we give in to the pressure to do them. Strength is NOT giving in to that pressure and temptation, no matter the consequences.

In Pirkei Avot, the Sayings of our Ancestors, we read that Shimon Ben Zoma, a rabbi from about nineteen hundred years ago, used to say, "איזו הוא גיבור? החובש את יצרו." (*Eizeh hu gibor? Hachoveish et yitzro.*)—Who is strong? Those who can control their evil inclination." This is a reference to

a midrash that says that humans were created with two inclinations---the *yetzer hatov*, the good inclination, and the *yetzer hara*, the evil inclination. The *yetzer hatov* is the kind, compassionate, structured, and rule-following tendency within us. While we might hold it up as the ideal, it's not particularly interesting (in my not-so-humble opinion). The *yetzer hara*, on the other hand, is the egocentric, wild, rule-breaking, and destructive tendency within us. Interestingly, though, the ancient rabbis tell a handful of stories in which the *yetzer hara* is not completely evil, the way we might imagine an internal demon or devil.

In one of my favorite Talmudic stories about the *yetzer hara*, the sages have won such favor from God that they can ask for anything and God will grant it. Thinking that they might be able to rid the world of evil, they ask God to send them the *yetzer hara*. God warns them that they won't like the consequences, but the sages insist. God releases the *yetzer hara* and the sages capture it in a thick lead pot with a thick lead lid to prevent its roar from being heard, lest God take pity on it and release it.

For three days, the sages hold the *yetzer hara* captive. During that time they notice something unusual---not a single egg can be found in the Land of Israel. They quickly realize that they have to release the *yetzer hara*. If they had destroyed it as intended, no houses would be built, no produce would be grown, and no babies would be born.

The *yetzer hara* is necessary for life to exist because it is the creative force within us as well as the destructive force. But it cannot have free rein; we have to harness it, directing it away from the temptation to lie, cheat, steal, gossip, betray, hoard, evade, oppress, etc.—all of which

require some amount of creativity—and directing it toward good means and ends. Each time we control our *yetzer hara*, every time we withstand its pressure directing us toward destructive ends, we show that we are strong and we reinforce our strength.

Strength is also the ability to *overcome* great force or pressure. As anyone who has dealt with hardships, significant challenges, life-threatening illnesses, or the like knows, occasionally life tries to knock us down to the ground. We are bowled over and struggle immensely just to get back up. But those of us who survive those experiences, who manage to find our way back up after being knocked down, we have a hard-won resilience, fortitude, and strength that will not fail us. Just knowing that we have that strength allows us to overcome the challenges we are sure to face in the future.

But what really makes us *feel* strong is when we share that strength—and the empathy and compassion we've gained from our own experience—with others who need support. There are countless stories of people who survived hardship or trauma who then go on to create organizations or support groups around similar issues. When I lived in Los Angeles, I learned about Beit T'Shuvah, a Jewish addiction recovery center and synagogue that was co-founded by a social worker and a rabbi who, before applying to rabbinical school, was a con man and an alcoholic. When I lived in Denver, I learned about Judi's House, a children's bereavement support organization that was started by a football player whose mother died when he was 12. Earlier this year, a handful of rabbis

who have experienced pregnancy loss, stillbirth, or the death of a child realized that, despite the existence of many support groups, not a single one was geared for Jewish parents. So they came together and created one. I haven't learned about the Tacoma and Pierce County resources yet, but I'm sure that there are similar organizations here, not to mention the many national ones, that share the hardwon strength of people who have overcome life's challenges.

We see this same empathy and guidance on a much smaller, but no less important, scale too—when a cancer survivor volunteers to sit with patients undergoing chemotherapy, or when a widow invites a recently bereaved friend over for dinner, or even when a child who has struggled mightily to learn how to do math becomes a math teacher so future students can have a better experience. We might wish not to have suffered or struggled, but we can transform our pain by using our new strength to help others.

And when each of us uses our various strengths and abilities to help others, the whole community becomes stronger. We can't do everything, nor should we. Our community is more robust, more nimble, healthier, and more blessed when everyone has the opportunity to share their gifts. We learn to trust each other, rely on each other, and problem-solve together. And when we share the fortitude and compassion that we've gained from overcoming challenges, we become united as a community of strength.

I look around this sanctuary tonight and I see so many strong people with so many different strengths. Every single one of you has something—many things perhaps—that make you strong. Even those of you watching the livestream or watching the recording later, I know that every one of you has gifts and talents of strength.

And, despite my short time here, I also see and know that many of you in our community need help to share your strengths. For some of you, the help you need is just someone to reach out and invite you to participate. Others of you need temporary support to get through a rough time—meals during an illness, people to show up to ensure a *minyan* for *shiva*, or someone to gather clothes and toys because you're a foster parent and children are dropped off with little advance notice. Having support from the community to deal with challenges makes it easier to share your gifts.

And then there are all the members of our community who, because of age or disease or disability, regularly struggle to feel connected to our community. On top of that, because of your physical distance or other limitations, you are often not invited to share your gifts and strengths with us. You might need rides to the temple so you can greet our students as they come in for school. Or you might be the perfect person to support us from home by making phone calls or helping organize volunteers or doing the research for the right technology to support a multi-access congregation. You might be happy to bake or cook for caring bags to bring to someone else in need as long as someone else can pick them up. Or you might be able to do something else that I'm not thinking of. But I know that you have strengths to share with this community.

We at Temple Beth El need your help to strengthen our congregational family. One of the things I particularly appreciated about TBE during my interviews was the level of lay involvement in sustaining the work of the temple. And we have some fabulous volunteers who help us do all the things that need to get done. I've also noticed a number of places where we could use more help to really accomplish all that we want to do. We need some of you to be brainstormers, organizers, or doers on committees. We need you to greet those coming into our building on busy days so that this feels like a home rather than a fortress. We need you to help with setting up the technology we have or looking into additional resources so that we can include everyone, wherever you are. We need you to set up for or clean up after onegs so we can enjoy a little nosh and schmooze before or after services like the family we are. Or we could use you to support a single program or event.

We also have less mission-focused tasks that would free up our staff to do some of the higher-level work that needs to get done, like stuffing envelopes for mailings or organizing our relocated children's library or shopping for snacks for the religious school.

We are working on putting together a system in place to allow each of us to share our strengths, gifts, and abilities with others. In the next couple of weeks, you'll get an email with the help we know we need, as well as a place for you to share strengths that we might not have known about but could serve our congregation well. The goal is to offer each of you a low-pressure way for you to offer help and support when you're available and in the ways you want.

I also want to make it easier for those of us who need help to ask for it---remember needing help doesn't make you weak, it just means you have different strengths. It also allows someone else to share their gifts and abilities. If every person in our congregation volunteered just once (though we hope you'll volunteer even more!), we would all benefit. Please join me in making our community even stronger than it already is, connected by the bonds of support and care, of compassion and hope.

So what makes you strong? Is it your resilience, your perseverance, or your stamina? Is it your compassion, your temperament, or your easy joy? Are you wise or intelligent or insightful? Do you have a strong internal moral compass or a passion for making the world more just? Are you a healer, a teacher, a fixer, a problem-solver? Do you create works of beauty or make delicious food or craft instruments of use and comfort? Strength comes in all shapes and sizes, in our abilities and characteristics and in those of our friends and family. What makes you strong?

I wish all of us the fortitude to make it through the trials of life and to make our dreams a reality, the courage to acknowledge our limits so we know when to ask for help, the confidence to see beyond our own egos and insecurities to help others succeed, and the persistence to turn our creative energies from sin to blessing. May we use our gifts, our assets, and our talents to enrich our lives and the lives of those around us with hope, love, and strength.

Kein y'hi ratzon—may this be God's will and may this be our will.