

Strengthening Ourselves and One Another
Rosh Hashanah Day 2 Sermon, 5781
by Rabbi Scott Shafrin

Welcome back everyone. I have always believed that the things we do regularly have a way of shaping our interactions with the world. For the past month, twice a day, we have read the following words that conclude Psalm 27:

קִוֵּה אֱלֹהִים חֲזַק וַיֵּאמֶץ לַגֵּר וְקִוֵּה אֱלֹהִים
Look to the ONE; be strong and of courageous heart! Look to Adonai!

What does it mean to be strong, חֲזַק in Hebrew? I have thought about this question as far back as I can remember and answered it a million different ways. When I think of people who embody my own idea of strength, I think of leaders who have some sort of bearing and perseverance that almost borders on the superhuman. I think of those leaders who handled times of crisis with poise, diplomacy, tact, and courage; I think of justice heroes who fight for what is right, often at great personal cost to them, their families, their communities, and often giving their very lives for what they believe. What do these individuals have that allow them to continue, and often to succeed, in the most difficult of circumstances?

The first person I remember thinking of as a model of healthy strength is my older brother, Jason. Yes, he was physically stronger than me, strong

enough to break many of my toys throughout the years. But that's not really what I think of when I picture my older brother. I think of his completely calm and unflappable nature. I have never met anyone who could be as cool and level-headed as my brother. We have been together for almost four decades now and I can hardly remember a time when I have seen him upset, enraged, despondent, or at his wits' end. He always manages to handle things, to have a plan, to stay calm, and to figure things out.

I think about this often, especially when I am feeling like things are too difficult, too much for me to handle. I think about that feeling of talking to my brother and remember that strength he has always been happy to share with me and with everyone around him, and I often ask, "Where does that come from?"

Rashi, the 11th Century French commentator, describes what a person who has this sort of unshakable strength might look like. In a commentary on Parashat Balak (Numbers 22:4), Rashi tries to explain why Balak sends the priest Bilaam to curse the Jewish People as opposed to simply sending his army. The midrash he cites describes Balak going to investigate this upstart people near his lands, and finds himself in awe of Moses, how he is able to rally his people, discern judgements in difficult situations, and lead B'nai Yisrael through seemingly impossible odds

toward a brighter future. Balak asks the Midianites, who once sheltered Moses when he fled Egypt, “What is the source of this man Moses’ strength?” and they respond, “His strength resides in the words of his mouth, which can move both humans and the Divine.”

Hearing this, Balak thinks that if he can find his own prophet, whose words carry strength as well, he can neutralize Moses’ power and ultimately defeat him. But, as the story goes, even Bilaam’s heart is softened by the strength that Moses shares, and the power of his own words fail him as Bilaam’s curses turn to prayers of love and compassion.

How incredible that Bilaam’s strength is not overpowered by the force, violence, or threats from Moses and the Jewish People, but rather that the effect of the graceful power Moses displays encourages Bilaam to do something to help rather than to hurt!

And as it turns out this notion that strength is a positive and contagious force for change runs throughout the Torah. When Lot and his family are told to leave Sodom before it is destroyed, he hesitates to leave, and we read:

וַיִּחְזְקוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים בְּיָדוֹ וּבְיַד-אִשְׁתּוֹ וּבְיַד שְׁתֵּי בָנָתָיו בְּחֻמָּלָתָא עָלָיו וַיֹּצֵאֵהוּ וַיַּנְחֵהוּ מִחוּץ
לְעִיר

Still he delayed. So the men seized his hand, and the hands of his wife and his two daughters—in the LORD’s mercy on him—and brought him out (Gen 19:16)

Ramban explains this phrase **וַיַּחֲזֶקְנוּ בְיָדוֹ** , not as God’s messenger physically grasping Lot and his entire family by the hand, partially because that would take a large number of hands, but rather that this phrase has its own spiritual resonance. Rather than dragging them away from the city by force, God sends this messenger to strengthen Lot’s own agency and that of his family in order to help them make the unthinkable courageous decision to leave their homes and community and everything they have ever known for an uncertain destination and future.

In fact, this exact same language is mirrored in Exodus 12:33 when B’nai Yisrael are hastening to leave Egypt but still bemoaning their fate, and the Egyptians “strengthened the People.” It could not possibly mean that the Egyptians are physically pushing the Jewish people to the Egyptian border, since we know that Pharaoh and his army only pursue them later on. Instead, we are meant to understand that through their words and deeds the Egyptians compelled the Jewish People to rally themselves and get up the courage to leave.

When God displays strength in the Torah, God is often described as possessing a **יָד חֲזָקָה וְזֶרַע נְטוּיָה** , “A mighty hand and an outstretched arm.” This is God at God’s most influential, producing signs and wonders, miracles that resonate even with us today, like the parting of the Sea of

Reeds or lifting up those most historically ignored and downtrodden in our society. God's strength comes not only from vanquishing armies, but in God's ability to do what seems conventionally unthinkable, from turning the impossible into real possibility. And it is THAT strength that has continued to imbue individuals and communities with faith and courage throughout the generations.

That sense that strength can grant courage to others comes through when we utter the phrase חזק, חזק, ונתחזק after finishing a book of Torah. Five times a year, we ask the entire community to absorb the words that have given strength to thousands of years of our people and we hope and pray to have a piece of that strength rub off on us as well. This imperative first delivered by King David's general, Yoav, before they were to battle the Ammonites (II Samuel 10:12), rallying the armies of Israel, saying:

חֲזַק וְנִתְחַזֵּק בְּעַד־עַמֵּנוּ וּבְעַד אֶרֶץ אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְיָ יַעֲשֶׂה הַטּוֹב בְּעֵינָיו:

"Let us be strong and resolute for the sake of our people and the land of our God; and Adonai will do what God deems right."

Our strength affects others, who in turn marshal their own inner resources to pass that strength along. And our Tradition tells us, again and again, that when the Creator of the World sees this, it even heartens God to help the world move in a positive direction. It is a partnership. We must

give one another strength, work together to get through every difficult moment, use every ounce of our compassion, our savvy, our grit, and our love to deal with a world that is off course, to handle life that for so many of us is more difficult and precarious today than we could have ever imagined.

I know that for many of us, this past year could not have ended soon enough. 5780 was a year unlike any other in recent memory and for all of us there were unprecedented struggles with which to contend. But I have been given an abundance of courage by the strength shown by so many of you throughout this community and around the world.

So this New Year, 5781, I ask you to share your strength.

גִּתְחֻזָּק - Strengthen one another by sharing resources and helping people through their worst times, even simply reaching out to give a kind word or to sit and chat (remotely or at an appropriate social distance).

גִּתְחֻזָּק - Strengthen one another by gathering together remotely and affirming that community is important, and maybe even more relevant than ever, when we could easily succumb to the negative thoughts and feelings that months of isolation can produce.

גִּתְחֻזָּק - Strengthen one another by giving what you can to others in need and standing up for your values, even when it is hard or inconvenient. Especially then.

נתחזק - Strengthen one another through word and deed, with song and dance, with food and celebration, with comfort and compassion, with funds and resources, with deep prayers and with our vulnerability.

נתחזק - Strengthen one another by remembering that every human being is a reflection of the Divine One, the Source of Life and Blessing, and worthy of our love and respect.

And when we do that, when we join our strength together, we pray that the Creator of All Things, the Holy Blessed One, look down on us, bless us, see our strength, and help us, in this new year, to do whatever we can for one another, to do what we know is right.

חזק ואמץ לבך, Be strong and maintain a courageous heart.

Shanah tova.