



Rosh Hashanah Morning 5779: Who is Strong?

Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, D.Phil., Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom, September 10, 2018

I don't remember much about summer camp. But there is one thing I remember clear as day. One evening at Camp Shalom, in Gravenhurst, Ontario, we were shown a film called *The Wave*. Students in a high school history class were learning about Nazi Germany, and they asked their young teacher: "How could the Germans sit back while the Nazis slaughtered people all around them?"¹ "It was a good question," the teacher, Ron Jones, wrote. "I didn't know the answer."²

So he started an experiment. He introduced his students to three key concepts: *Strength through discipline*. *Strength through community*. *Strength through action*. He started a group, the Wave, complete with a symbol and salute. Over the course of a week, this group gained so much momentum that it transformed the school, with followers turning –sometimes violently – on their opponents. The teacher knew the experiment had to stop. So he gathered the students for a rally, promising he would show them the movement's leader. A room full of students, chanting: *Strength through discipline*. *Strength through community*. *Strength through action*. And then he showed them: a clip of Hitler at Nuremberg. *This*, he said, is your leader. And *that* is how it happened.

This story – and the chant – stayed in my mind from that day until now. And it planted in me the question that I want to share with you today: What does it mean to be strong?

This is not an uncomplicated question.

As Jews, we have all too often been subject to the strength of others. Professor Ruth Wisse recounts the story of a Jewish child in Warsaw in 1939. As Nazi soldiers harassed him in the street, "The child's mother ran out of the courtyard, picked up her bruised little boy, placed his cap back on his head, and said to him, "Come inside the courtyard and *za a mentsch*.""³ This injunction – to be fully human in the face of cruelty and force, is at the core of many Jewish values. However, Wisse insists, the Holocaust

¹ Todd Strasser, *The Wave* (New York, 1981), p.13. Based on an incident in a California high school in 1969.

² Ron Jones, "The Third Wave" (1976) http://www.thewavehome.com/1976_The-Third-Wave_story.htm.

³ Ruth Wisse, *Jews and Power* (New York, 2007), ix.



“complicated the directive to be a *mensch*. That little boy in Warsaw could not have done his mother’s bidding, because becoming fully human presupposed staying alive.”⁴

Our starting place must be that strength is whatever is required to survive. As my friend, Rabbi Brent Spodek writes, “if there is violence to be done, it is better to be holding the handle of the sword than facing the blade.”⁵

To hear these stories, we don’t need to go back eighty years, or even beyond our own walls. As part of our oral history project, two of Temple’s young adults, Noah Broccolini and Jacob Schwisberg, interviewed one of our ninety members over ninety, Manny Cohen. Manny shared this story:

When I was young... now the world is different, [but] the French kids at that time used to beat up the Jewish kids... [They] used to wait for me, and I had to learn how to run fast, but my Dad sent me to the Y to learn boxing... the Jewish kids are supposed to be what we call docile— “afraidy cats”, you know? But, when I learned a little bit how to stand up to the others, my fellows that bothered me, well, when I had enough confidence, when I left Hebrew school, the French kids didn’t have to chase me, they were terribly surprised they didn’t have to chase me, they were going to beat me up. But, they found a difference, I beat them up. And, from then on... my sport was boxing.⁶

Jewish law teaches very clearly that we are obligated to self-defence. It is better to beat up your attacker than be beaten up; better to hold the handle than face the blade.

It’s the story of Purim; it’s the story of Chanukah; it’s the story of Yom Ha’Atzmaut. But today is Rosh Hashanah – a day that we step outside of history just enough to try to understand it, to gain a new perspective on our world and on our lives. And so I ask again: What is strength? In a world full of self-styled strongmen, of the belief that might makes right, what does Judaism teach us about being strong?

⁴ Wisse, xii.

⁵ Rabbi Brent Spodek, Beacon Hebrew Alliance, “Better the Handle than the Blade” March 3, 2013. Spodek goes on to argue that this is the starting point, but not the end point, of our Jewish journey. <https://beaconhebrewalliance.org/blog/better-handle-blade>

⁶ Oral history interview at Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom, April 28, 2018. Transcripts and recordings soon to be available online.



It is not by accident that I remembered *The Wave* this year. I saw the book and brought it home for my daughters. Why? Because, perhaps like you, I am scared. I am scared by the tendencies I see towards fascism. I am scared by what Yehuda Kurtzer of the Hartman Institute describes as “a global turn in which majorities and ruling parties around the world cynically forget that how you govern minorities is the single biggest determinant as to whether you are actually a democracy or merely a tyranny.”⁷ I am scared by the human instinct to see force as the solution, and the propensity of those in power to abuse that power, whether they are priests or rabbis, professors or politicians. I sat in a Shabbat service in Jerusalem this summer opposite a man, a giant in the Jewish world, who had just been exposed as a perpetrator – for decades – of sexual harassment and assault, and I thought to myself: Is this how he saw us? And I thought: What made him think this was ok?

As Jews, and women, and others have been without power, we have had more than our share of facing the blade. Would that it was not so. But it has given us insight, as a people; it has given us a different perspective on strength. Not: *Strength through discipline. Strength through community. Strength through action.* Instead: *Strength through restraint. Strength through hope. Strength through compassion.*

Eyzehu gibor? The rabbis ask. “Who is strong?”⁸ *Hakoveish et yetzro* – “The one who overpowers his *yetzer*.” The *yetzer* is not an external enemy. It is an internal inclination. The rabbis teach that every human being has two inclinations, the good one (*yetzer hatov*) and the bad one (*yetzer hara*) – like the little devil and the little angel sitting on our cartoon shoulders. In every decision, the rabbis say, we have an internal battle between the two. Do I honk and swear at the person who cut me off in traffic, or do I give them a pass? Do I spread the juicy gossip, or do I bite my tongue? Do I take the ethical shortcut, or do I do the right thing, even if no one is looking?

Strength through restraint. It’s a counter-cultural concept. But have you ever wondered why two of the primary markers of Jewish practice are Shabbat and kashrut? We don’t need to observe them in a traditional way to understand the point: You don’t eat everything you want. You don’t do everything you want. Long before Freud taught about ego and superego and id, Judaism gave us ways to develop our character by

⁷ Yehuda Kurtzer, Facebook post, July 19, 2018.

⁸ Pirkei Avot 4:1.



choosing to refrain; by teaching that what we really want and need is deeper than our momentary desires. Anyone who has struggled with addiction knows the strength involved in not taking that first drink, not reaching for the phone while driving, not doing what you know will hurt you.

The Bible gives us a strongman: Samson, who begins his career but tearing a lion into pieces with his bare hands, and ends it by toppling the pillars of the Philistine temple, even while blinded and bound. But the tragedy of Samson is that he is subject to his every whim, chasing after love and lust and revenge.⁹ He can't control his *yetzer*. We don't talk much about Samson – but who do we talk about, on this most important of days? We tell the story not of *Shimshon haGibor*, Samson the strongman, but of *Avraham Avinu*, Abraham our father. And what is the key feature of Abraham's story? Called to sacrifice his son to God, he keeps his ears open just enough to hear a different command: *he does not kill his son*.

“Wow, what a hero,” you may be thinking. “I manage to do that on a daily basis, and no one tells stories about me.” But in Abraham's culture, in Abraham's world, to sacrifice a child was a great display of faith. He was starting a new religion, showing the power of his God by following this command. But when God sends an angel telling him to stop, Abraham actually stops. He stops the knife mid-motion, he goes against his instincts, and he stops. He hears what biblical scholar David Rosenberg calls “the voice of conscience in the world at last.”¹⁰

Strength through restraint. I recently read an extraordinary story, from when Israel reunited Jerusalem in the 1967 War. Yossi Klein Halevi describes how the Israeli troops reached the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa mosque, built on the site of the ancient Jewish Temple.¹¹ Two members of the brigade climbed to the top of the Dome and fastened the Israeli flag to its pole. But almost immediately, “Defense Minister Moshe Dayan, watching the scene through binoculars from Mount Scopus, urgently radioed

⁹ For a brilliant perspective on the Samson story, which helped shape this sermon, see David Grossman, *Lion's Honey: The Myth of Samson* (Toronto, 2007). He includes the tidbit that a chain of body-building clubs was named after Samson, as well as Israeli military units (p.88).

¹⁰ David Rosenberg, *Abraham: The First Historical Biography* (New York, 2006), p.274.

¹¹ Yossi Klein Halevi, “The Astonishing Israeli Concession of 1967,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, June 7, 2017.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/06/israel-paratroopers-temple-mount-1967/529365/>.



Gur and demanded: Do you want to set the Middle East on fire?” The flag came back down. Halevi writes:

It is, in retrospect, an astonishing moment of religious restraint. The Jewish people had just returned to its holiest site, from which it had been denied access for centuries, only to effectively yield sovereignty at its moment of triumph.

“Israelis still vehemently argue,” he notes, “over whether Dayan acted with wisdom or weakness.” But Major Arik Achmon, who was there when the flag was raised, reflects at the age of 84: “Can you imagine what the reaction would have been in the Muslim world if a photograph of that had been published? I’m proud that we raised the flag, and I’m relieved that we took it down.” *Strength through restraint.*

But we also must note the *tikvah*, the hope, that sustained those soldiers through battle, and that led to the iconic picture – not of the flag raised above the Dome, but of the paratroopers by the Western Wall. *Strength through hope.* The strength of hope leads those perceived to be weak prevail over the conventionally strong; the story of Purim, of Chanukah, and of Pesach, of 1967. But strength through hope is also very personal. The strength that carries an aged grandparent through to the birth of a new baby, or a bar mitzvah or a wedding; that carries us, at any age, through serious illness or loss.

Psalm 27, read leading up to Rosh Hashanah, ends with the stunning line: “Had I not believed that I would see the goodness of God in the land of the living... Hope in the Eternal, be strong and strengthen your heart, and hope in the Eternal.” So much is in the ellipsis, in the three dots between hope’s absence, and its presence. The psalmist has been abandoned by his parents, and besieged by enemies. And yet he finds hope – not in his present circumstances, but in his ability to imagine that they can change. I think of Hannah from today’s haftarah, hoping and praying for a child – and of her modern descendants, enduring fertility treatments, time and time again. I think of the student retaking the class that she failed, the man in his 60s forced to look for new work, the woman mustering the courage to write a profile for online dating, and then even more courage to press *send*. We are strengthened by our hope.¹²

¹² Recommended reading: Dr. Jerome Groopman, *The Anatomy of Hope: How People Prevail in the Face of Illness* (New York, 2004).



There is, however, an important caveat. This summer, my friend, Rabbi David Schuck, taught about mental illness, and how we rabbis respond. So much Jewish teaching, he says, conveys a trajectory: we start with darkness, and end with light. But for some people, darkness does not, cannot, become light – and then when we insist that it can, we only isolate them more. “It is hard,” he says, “to talk about brokenness that stays broken.”¹³ And so we must remember that Judaism also includes those who don’t find hope: Job, whose friends, when they try to comfort him, only make things worse; and Jonah, whose story we read on Yom Kippur, dejected even when he succeeds. To quote A.A. Milne, author of Winnie the Pooh, speaking in Eeyore’s voice: “We can’t all and some of us don’t. That’s all there is to it.” For some, to speak of hope only adds to the weight of their illness – yet many of those who struggle are the strongest people I know. For them, to get out of bed in the mornings is harder than it would be for me to climb a mountain.

This piece of wisdom made the rounds this year: "One awesome thing about Eeyore is that even though he is basically clinically depressed, he still gets invited to participate in adventures and shenanigans with all of his friends. And they never expect him to pretend to feel happy, they just love him anyway, and they never leave him behind or ask him to change."

So strength through hope, yes. But also strength through perseverance and presence, through walking with each other through the valley of the shadow even when there is no end in sight.

And this brings us to the final piece: *Strength through compassion.*

I cannot enter the New Year and leave behind the images of families, separated in the US. We all have seen stories that break our hearts, just like the story of Aylan Kurdi did on Rosh Hashanah three years ago. Unlike then, I have no direct action to offer, beyond the usual urging to give time and money to causes you support. But I also urge us to hold strong to the belief that this is not normal; this is not right.

Amidst all the coverage, a quote from President Trump stood out. As he signed the executive order formally ending family separation (though these reunifications are far from complete), he said:

¹³ Rabbi David Schuck, Hartman Institute, Rabbinic Leadership Initiative teaching, July 23, 2018.



...the dilemma is that if you're weak, which some people would like you to be, if you're really, really pathetically weak, the country is going to be overrun with millions of people. And if you're strong, then you don't have any heart. That's a tough dilemma. Perhaps I would rather be strong, but that's a tough dilemma.¹⁴

By this way of seeing the world, you can be weak, or you can be strong. You can be compassionate, or you can be strong. But strength and compassion are not opposites. Saying that children shouldn't be taken from their parents and kept in cages is not weak. How is it that we have to say this out loud? But in times like these, we look to our tradition and look to our values to affirm our understanding of the world. This is not fake news. This is *emes*, truth.

We read in the Torah that God brought us out of Egypt *b'yad chazakah uvezeroa netuyah*, with an strong hand and an outstretched arm. Think about it. What an extraordinary image! We usually think of a strong hand as a closed fist. But here we learn that God's strong hand is attached to an arm that reaches out. The God of Exodus is both a warrior and a healer; God drowns the Egyptians to save us, yet prevents us from celebrating their loss. And we, made in God's image, are taught to flex our muscles of compassion – because we know that strength without compassion is just cruel.

Because the fact is, the greatest strength I see takes the form of compassion:

The adult child, caring for a parent with dementia. The parent repeating, "I hate you," again and again and again, and the child responding with patience and care.

The young couple, hitting a serious bump in the road, and having the courage to find a counsellor.

The single parent going home at the end of the day, knowing they face the grueling routine of meals and bedtime and just one more glass of water, and somehow managing to get through it all and wake up the next morning and do it again with love.

And yes, the people who stay involved because they refuse to look away, who hold onto the belief that we can make a difference.

¹⁴ Transcript of immigration meeting, June 20, 2018. <https://www.vox.com/2018/6/20/17484506/family-separation-trump-immigration-congress>



I am awed by the strength that I witness, that I see in all of you.

My friends, we stand at the beginning of a new year. May we enter it with strength:
Strength through restraint. Strength through hope. Strength through compassion.
Chazak chazak venitchazek – may we be strong, may we be strong, and may we
strengthen one other.