

When I was a kid, my family would sometimes gather 'round and watch some WWF: World Wrestling Federation. And there would be Hulk Hogan in his hay day, ripping off his shirt. And Rowdy Roddy Piper was there in his kilt. And the loveable, sometimes bad guy, Andre the Giant, was still around. And someone would body slam someone else from the top ropes or someone would leave the ring and throw a chair. And there was always a lot of stomping and dramatic close up finger pointing. And I remember asking my parents at some point: this isn't real, right? And they clarified: no. They're actors. This is all pretend, all fake.

And I've been thinking about that some in these past few weeks. The WWF trafficked in a lot of muscle flexing, entertainment violence, and dramatic demonstrations of what **we** were meant to perceive as strength. But - at least back then - it all had a kind of campy feel to it. It was ridiculous, and seemed more or less innocuous.

But right now, in a way that is not at all campy and is definitely not innocuous, we are watching the political unfolding of a different kind of display of what **we** are supposed to perceive as strength. And it's not meant as entertainment at all. It's coming in the form of **threats** - threats of mass deportation of immigrants and asylum seekers, and threats from appointees who promise to dismantle the education system, for example. It's coming in the form of **intimidation** - like Congresswoman Nancy Mace running a bully campaign so the first transgender Congresswoman, Sarah McBride, can't use the communal bathroom, or intimidation like Nazis marching in the streets with swastika flags in Ohio and Michigan. It's coming in the form of an attempt to **control**, like controlling women's bodies or controlling the words educators can use, as is happening now at the University of Texas. **Strong-arming** to demonstrate strength.

But I think what is actually happening is that today, we as a nation have a profound misunderstanding about what strength actually is. What it looks like, how it functions, how a person or a nation exercises real strength. It's a misunderstanding being capitalized on by the incoming administration and by *some* of its adherents - not all, but some - the ones who deal in hate.

Of course, taking a page out of the WWF when lives are at stake is neither ridiculous nor pretend. It's toxic and it's dangerous.

But the truth is that threatening, intimidating, terrorizing, desiring to control, or physically overpowering someone, or some nation ... these are not actually indicators of strength. These are often signs of weakness, or cowardice, or fear, or a low sense of self. If you are actually strong, you don't need to intimidate or threaten or try to control what people say or think or do.

But strength, in its true expressions, is an extremely important quality and value, especially at a time that is clearly going to require us to be strong. And we don't have to concede the definition of strength to someone else, because Jewish tradition offers us what I think is a very compelling narrative about strength.

In Pirkei Avot, the text poses a question: *eizeh hu gibor?* Who is strong? Gibor. Heroically strong. And it answers: *Ha'kovesh et yitzro*. The one who conquers . . . ah, conquers - that's violent, that's overpowering, that's smashing to smithereens. But it continues. *Hakoveish et yitzro*. The one who conquers his evil inclination. The one who can control her expression of aggression. Who can conquer his own feelings of self doubt, her jealousies, his human inclination to flex in order to prove something. This one emerges with an undeniable inner strength - resilient and unflinching. This, our tradition teaches, is a *gibur*, a strong person.

And it's not just an attribute of humanity. The word *gibur* might sound familiar to us. In the second blessing of the Amidah, we say: *atah gibur l'olam Adonai*, God, you are Gibur, strong, heroically so. And then come the examples of God's strength: *m'chalkel chayim b'chesed* - You sustain life, through what? B'chesed, through kindness. That's strength. *Someich noflim, v'rofei cholim, u'matir asurim*. You lift up the fallen, You heal the sick, You free the captive. *U'mkeyeim emunato lisheini afar*. you give hope and faith to those who sleep in the dust.

Every act of God's strength as a *Gibur* in this passage is inextricably linked to great kindness and compassion. Strength, we learn, is exerting extraordinary effort for the sake of one who is beaten down - not beating them down in the first place. **That** is our definition of strength.

And this week's Torah portion, Chayei Sarah, is a master class on what strength actually is and is not, in practice. First, we find Abraham grieving the loss of his beloved wife, Sarah. And the text says: *Avraham lispod l'Sarah v'livkotah*. Abraham mourned for Sarah and he cried. We have a terrible track record in this country of teaching, especially, our young boys and men, that crying is weak. Only wusses cry. Be tough. And so our young men learn to . . . be tough. And they turn their pain outward, to protect themselves from being seen as weak. But Avraham cries. There is no notion here that he should be ashamed of this. He cries and when he's done, *vayakom Avraham*, he rises up and he negotiates publicly with an entire people, to take care of the business of burying his wife. In Jewish tradition, we see this, accompanying the dead for burial, as an act of extraordinary compassion. He is a *gibur*, using his strength to enact kindness. And Abraham *was* strong. This is a man who argues with **God** to save the lives of the innocent people of Sodom. Again, using his strength to protect those who need it.

Afterward, Abraham sends his servant to go to the land of his birth to find a wife for his son, Isaac. The servant asks: and what if I find her and she won't come with me? Now, this is a patriarchal text written 3,000 years ago. Couldn't it say: "so take her. It's God's will that she come here and marry my son." But instead, Abraham responds: "if she won't consent, then you are released from your vow." And indeed, when his servant does find a person he believes is the one, the text makes a huge deal of her family asking her if she consents to go with him to marry Isaac. And a couple of thousand years later, Rashi says that it is from this exchange that we learn that a woman must never be forced into a marriage. Because controlling someone's life and body, or forcing them into submission - this is not an act of strength. That is a demonstration of weakness, as well as a fear of one's own weakness.

And what of physical strength? Which category is that in? Well, that depends. Enter: Rebecca. So back to the story: The servant sets off with ten camels and travels a long way to find this wife for Isaac. He comes to rest by a well and he says to himself: "the woman who comes and says I will haul up enough water for you and for your ten camels to drink - that's the one." And so it happens that Rebecca comes to the well and says exactly that. And then she draws enough water from that well to slake the thirst of the servant and his 10 camels. Camels . . . who are not known for their tiny sips of water as much as they are known for "drinking like a camel." That's why we say that. It's a lot of buckets of water to bring to the surface. Rebecca is physically extremely strong. I picture her like Luisa from the movie *Encanto*. Just buff as hell. But what does she use her strength to do? To go so far above and beyond in her care for a weary stranger and his enormous animals who are desperately thirsty. Rebecca is a *gibur* because she uses her physical and inner effort to lift up and save others. That's strength.

So why does any of this matter - arguing over the definition of a word? Because there's a dispute about this playing out right now on our national stage. And it matters where we land. That kind of action - force or threat or intimidation - is meant to make us feel small and in danger, to cower, like someone bigger is in charge now. It's meant also to define how we will be to one another over the next four years. It's meant to make us afraid. So afraid that we might choose to stay quiet in the face of our neighbor's suffering for fear we ourselves will be next. But we have a counter move: Actual strength. How to *vayakom*, rise from our grief like Abraham, for the sake of compassionate action, how to be a *gibur*, like God is a *gibur*, like Rebecca is a *gibur* - exercising **our** extraordinary effort to lift up the fallen, heal the sick, free the captive, protect the most vulnerable, turn to one another, care for the thirsty and hungry, and embrace those who sleep in the dust.

I pray that **this** is the definition of strength that prevails because of how it lives in you, and in us, and in this community, and in so many communities who know that strength is something that lifts up and does not push down. I pray that whenever we see or hear an act of intimidation or threat or an attempt to control, we see it for what it is, and we feel stir in us the ancient and unstoppable *gibur* in each of us that calls us to counteraction - to care for the other, to exert extraordinary efforts of kindness for family, for neighbor, for stranger, for the suffering, for freedom, and for future. May we never forget how strong, our definition, we truly are.

Shabbat shalom.