

May We Strengthen One Another

Parashat Pekudei

Evan Traylor, CBE Rabbinic Intern

March 28, 2025

Shabbat Shalom! Over the past two months, we have been exploring the Book of Exodus, the story of our people's liberation from Egypt that we will soon read for Passover. And this Shabbat, with Parashat Pekudei, we mark the end of reading this book. Tomorrow morning, across the street in our sanctuary at CBE, and in sanctuaries around the world, Jews will loudly say the words "Chazak, Chazak, V'nitchazek" upon finishing our reading of Torah. This phrase literally means, "Be strong, be strong, and let us strengthen one another." Quite an appropriate message for the times we find ourselves in right now. But, when I hear the word "strength", my first thought is not necessarily to think about the ancient words of our tradition, especially those words that, like this week's parsha, are focused intensely on the architectural details necessary to build the Tabernacle. Perhaps you too, like me, initially think about physical strength or fitness, being able to run a marathon or lift weights in the gym or just being able to get from one place to another. In this paradigm, strength is all about physical fortitude and ability. But the reading of Torah being tied to the ideal of strength comes from deep within our tradition.

Fast forward from our Torah portion to the end of Torah and the beginning of Joshua, the successor of Moses. In setting out to take on this leadership position, God tells Joshua that he must be **יָצִיק וְאַמֵץ**, “Be strong and resolute” in guiding the Israelites into the Promised Land.¹ This pep talk of sorts continues with God providing Joshua with his path forward:

לֹא-יִמּוּשׁ סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה הַזֶּה

“Let not this Book of Torah cease from your lips, but recite it day and night, so that you may faithfully observe all that is written in it. Only then will you prosper in your undertakings and only then will you be successful.”²

Although not using the explicit language of “Chazak, Chazak, V'nitchazek”, we can still understand the connection between strength and Torah, and about how studying Torah can lead us down a meaningful, joyful, and righteous path in the world. We utter this phrase at the end of a reading of a book of Torah because we know that Torah gives us strength - individually and communally. That in the stories of our ancestors in Torah, we learn about ourselves and how we interact with the world. The wisdom of Torah can guide us as we make difficult choices in our lives. And the eternal truths of our tradition - that all people are created in the image of God, that we are to welcome the stranger, that there is always a Promised Land ahead of us - these eternal truths ground us and strengthen us as we confront a confusing, scary, and sometimes impossible world. Torah gives us strength - strength to live the very, very best version of our lives.

¹ Joshua 1:6

² Joshua 1:8

Tonight, I'm interested in this idea of strength and gaining strength from the wisdom of our Torah because over the past two months, during the almost exact same time as we've been reading Exodus, we have been witnessing very different ideas and stories of strength, and what counts as someone being strong. In particular, the ideas and stories of strength coming out of the White House seem to have distorted the ideas we receive about strength from the wisdom of our Torah.

For example, if one only listens to the White House, one would think conquering more and more land around the world - Canada, Greenland, Panama - is a sign of America's strength. This is a seeming return to the ideas of manifest destiny, a dangerous theology that posits that God wants us, the United States in particular, to conquer land around the world. This theology has already wrought displacement, colonization, and genocide upon the peoples of this land, and is rooted in strength through utter dominance of others.

If one only listens to the White House, strength is also exhibited through the direct attacks against the most vulnerable. Whether it is benefits for seniors, food programs for children, medications for impoverished communities around the world, deportations for those seeking safety and a better life here, and on and on and on, these are attacks against those who need the most support right now. The White House has embodied the ethos of Amalek, the character in our Torah whose most despicable act is to attack and destroy the people at the back of our wandering, the weakest among us, thereby making him look strong. In attacking the most vulnerable, the people who have little ability to hold the administration accountable, they project strength. But it is merely a projection.

If one only listens to the White House, strength is shown through a homogenous country, with everyone looking, feeling, and acting the same. Any celebration of diversity, especially diversity of race, gender, sexuality, and religion, makes us weaker, less able to unite together. When one is not white, straight, male, cisgender, Christian, or proudly, fully American, they are the other, they are the one bringing weakness to this country.

And if one only listens to the White House, strength comes from breaking all the rules, doing what one wants, showing no regard for the rule of law; strength comes from name-calling, denigrating others who don't agree with you; strength comes from lying, over and over and over again, about consequential and inconsequential things; and perhaps most importantly, for this White House, strength comes from one individual, with a sidekick or two, making others feel weak, and projecting strength and power no matter what happens.

These ideas of strength, of power, are too narrow, too exclusive. They are the ideas of strength from Egypt, or Mitzrayim in Hebrew, which literally means the "narrow place." If we are to take to heart our refrain "Chazak, Chazak, V'nitchazek", then we know that it is not enough for one to "be strong"; our hope, our goal is that by embodying strength, we also strengthen one another. Strength is incomplete without the ability to strengthen others, to ensure that their lives are better, more abundant, because of our strength. This seems to be the message missing from the White House, from the actions of Netanyahu, from leaders all around our world. As opposed to the narrow and exclusive ideas about strength that we are witnessing all around us right now, our Torah, particularly the Book of Exodus shows us what a compassionate, grounded, abundant, and loving strength can look like.

For example, early on in Exodus, two midwives, Shifra and Puah, stand up against Pharaoh's decree to kill all Israelite baby boys. In refusing this order and choosing to help their community thrive, they exhibit strength by not capitulating and choosing to put the community before themselves. We see strength in Moses ultimately accepting God's call to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, overcoming his fears of inadequacy to guide his people, our ancestors, to freedom and liberation. There is also strength in celebration, with Miriam packing her timbrels in advance and leading the people in song and dance after crossing the Red Sea. Moses again demonstrates strength by accepting the advice of his father-in-law Yitro and constructing more effective systems of governance. And, through the construction of the Mishkan, this holy space in which God will dwell among the people, we witness strength in all the Israelites coming together, those whose hearts moved them to action, to create this holy space.

Some in our country and world see strength as domination; but we know from Torah that strength is about community.

Some see strength as attacking the most vulnerable to make themselves look strong; but we know from Torah that strength is about lifting up those on the margins and creating a world of justice and righteousness for all.

Some see strength as everyone looking and acting the same; but we know from Torah that an erev rav, a mixed multitude of people joined the Israelites in escaping Egypt, and that we are stronger through our diversity.

And some see strength as Mitzrayim, as the “narrow place”; but we know from Torah that the “narrow place” is not the end of the story, and that liberation is around the corner. As we finish the Book of Exodus, we can take these stories, these lessons of our tradition with us into our world. We can refuse to listen to these other ideas about strength because we know that our strength comes from something much less fleeting. The wisdom of our Torah has sustained our people generation after generation and it can do the same for us right now, in this very moment. As we navigate this world, with its many challenges and pitfalls, may we hear this call toward strength: Chazak - May you be strong. Chazak - May you know your strength. V'nitchazek - And may we, each and every one of us, strengthen one another. Shabbat Shalom!

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V'nitchazek - And may we, each and every one of us, strengthen one another. Shabbat Shalom!

Notes/Outline:

- Chazak, Chazak, V'nitchazek & Chazak ubaruch
 - Focus on strength, and on strengthening one another
 - How else did they demonstrate strength throughout the Exodus story?
 - How else can we demonstrate strength right now?
 - We strengthen one another; need community to have courage, especially right now
 - Explore history of saying this phrase after finishing a book of Torah
- Last word of Exodus is “journeys”
 - “Just as important, the concluding verse of Exodus proclaims that the Israelites will not be alone on their long and difficult journey to the Promised Land. Rather, they are to be guided night and day by the luminous cloud of God’s presence.” - Carol Meyers
 - Israelites were strong, building pyramids in Egypt
 - Connect strength of the Israelites throughout Exodus
- Different ideas of strength right now, different conceptions of what people consider strong
 - Theology of manifest destiny
 - Patriarchal idea of strength through dominance, breaking things, etc.
 - Strength in isolation, in doing it by yourself
- Strength in Exodus
 - Shifra and Puah refusing deadly orders
 - Moses accepting help from Yitro
 - Strength by bringing gifts from everyone “whose hearts were moved” to create the Tabernacle
- <https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/chazak-chazak-vnitc-hazeik-1>
- Rashi on Exodus 39:43
 - חזק ויברך אתם משה AND MOSES BLESSED THEM — He said to them “May it be the will of God that His Shechinah rest upon the work of your hands
- II Samuel 10:12
 - חֲזַק וְנִתְחַזַּק בְּעַד-עַמּוּנוֹ וּבְעַד עַרְי אֱלֹהֵינוּ וַיְהִי הָיֵשׁוּב הַטּוֹב בְּעֵינָיו:
 - Let us be strong and resolute for the sake of our people and the land of our God; and the LORD will do what He deems right.”
- Joshua 1:6-8
 - חֲזַק וְאַמְץ כִּי אֲנִי תַנְחִיל אֶת-הָעָם הַזֶּה אֶת-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר-נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי לְאַבוֹתֶם לָתֵת לָהֶם:
 - “Be strong and resolute, for you shall apportion to this people the land that I swore to their fathers to assign to them.

- רַק חֲזִק וְאַמֵץ מְאֹד לְשָׁמֵר לַעֲשׂוֹת כְּכֹל-הַתּוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה מֹשֶׁה עַבְדִּי אֶל-תְּסוּר מִמֶּנּוּ יְמִין וּשְׂמֹאל לְמַעַן תִּשְׁפִּיל בְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר תִּלְךָ:
- But you must be very strong and resolute to observe faithfully all the Teaching that My servant Moses enjoined upon you. Do not deviate from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go.
- לֹא-יָמוּשׁ סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה הַזֶּה מִפִּיךָ וְהִגִּיתָ בּוֹ יוֹמָם וּלְיָלֵה לְלַמַּעַן תִּשְׁמַר לַעֲשׂוֹת כְּכֹל-הַכְּתוּב בּוֹ: כִּי-אֶז תִּצְלִיחַ אֶת-דְּרָכְךָ וְאֶז תִּשְׁפִּיל:
- Let not this Book of the Teaching cease from your lips, but recite it day and night, so that you may observe faithfully all that is written in it. Only then will you prosper in your undertakings and only then will you be successful.
- Pirkei Avot 1:4
 - Who is mighty? He who subdues his [evil] inclination, as it is said: “He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that rules his spirit than he that takes a city” (Proverbs 16:32).

That story begins with these ominous words:

וַיָּקָם מֶלֶךְ-חֲדָשׁ עַל-מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדַע אֶת-יוֹסֵף:

“A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph.”⁵

Just with those few words, we are to understand that although Joseph held power and influence with the previous pharaoh, this new ruler, this new king over Egypt, would bring something different, something more treacherous to our people. And that comes true through enslavement and mass murder. But, of course, our story takes a turn. Moses, who grows up in Pharaoh’s palace, comes to understand his past, is called upon by God to save our people, and eventually leads all the Israelites out of Egypt, singing and dancing on the shores of the Red Sea. After this triumphant moment, we receive Torah on Mount Sinai, confirming our commitment to God and to one another, and demonstrating our strength and determination to overcome the narrowness of Egypt and move toward the joy and abundance of the land overflowing with milk and honey. After Mount Sinai, our Torah goes into great detail about the construction of the Mishkan, the tabernacle in which God will dwell. This week’s Torah portion, Pekudei, concludes this epic book of Exodus and demonstrates how God will dwell among the people. As Bible scholar Carol Meyers notes, “...the concluding verse of Exodus proclaims that the Israelites will not be alone on their long and difficult journey to the Promised Land. Rather, they are to be guided night and day by the luminous cloud of God’s presence.”⁶

⁵ Exodus 1:8

⁶ Carol Myers on Parashat Pekudei. The Torah: A Women’s Commentary