

Torah as a Source of Strength

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Rabbi Judy Shanks writes about her beloved ninety-three years old mother-in-law Estelle, who “spends most of her day in bed. She reads a bit, watches too much news, dozes, wakes, and greets visitors with her signature smile. Estelle gazes at the collection of family photos at the foot of her bed, covering the entire span of her long life. Looking at her younger self, she asks, “Wait—who is that? It’s me with my little sister! Oh my God, I never thought I would still be here. How did all this happen?” Rabbi Shanks marvels at how Estelle finds the strength to keep going, given all that age and infirmity have taken away from her. She can do little that marked “the best years” of her life, and she looks nervous when “holding her own great-great-grandson on her first birthday.”ⁱ

Rabbi Shanks asks us to consider Moses at the beginning of the book of Deuteronomy. Approaching the age of one hundred twenty and the end of his life, Moses summons the strength to recount to the Children of Israel the story of the Exodus and desert wanderings—that is, their own story. As Rabbi Shanks describes it, “Through Moses’s reflections, we travel now...on a different kind of sacred journey where past and present conflate, and the long and short views of one (extraordinary) man’s life are woven seamlessly into a timeless guide for all future generations. Biblically, Moses’s final great gift of leadership is to teach us all how to live our last days with *g’vurah* [with strength].”ⁱⁱ

We all need strength—whether we are facing the final chapter of our lives or we are encountering challenges at work or school, with our health or relationships, in our families and communities, or even as a nation or human family. But what is “strength” exactly?

We are familiar with words of the prophet Zechariah, “Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit, says the God of hosts.”ⁱⁱⁱ Those words appear to suggest that strength, at least of a certain kind, is to be rejected. Rabbi Dovid Schwartz observes that, when people study Mussar, Jewish ethical discipline, focusing on *tikkun middot*, repairing the measures of their souls, they often skip the character trait of *g’vurah*, of strength. He admits that *g’vurah* hasn’t been expunged from the Mussar literature, but it is often ignored, perhaps because of concerns about toxic masculinity. He writes, “Sure, we are proud of the Israel Defense Force and may even take some ‘guilty pleasure’ in reading the Holocaust literature that deals with the exploits of the forest partisans and the insurgents of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. Yet we view these as the exceptions that prove the rule of the historical

Jewish personality makeup that is mild, non-violent, non-confrontational, deferential, and passive to a fault.”^{iv}

Traditionally, Judaism has associated physicality with women and spirituality with men, signaling which was considered more important. Many ultra-Orthodox men will return another man’s proffered hand with a purposefully limp handshake, tacitly indicating that spiritual, not physical, strength is preferred.

The other traditional way that Judaism has discussed strength is meaningful. We learn in *Pirkei Avot*, sayings of our sages, that a strong person is one who controls their urges. That kind of strength is critical to being a good and noble person, but I am not sure it helps us when we are feeling weak.

Moses, at age one hundred twenty, might well feel weak as he seeks to lead the Israelites on the final leg of their journey, particularly since he knows that he will not be privileged to accompany them into the Promised Land. Rabbi Shanks writes, “Moses’s final journey with his people requires him to access and explore his inner pool of strength and then make it accessible to *every* Israelite, who will, he prays, use it to bring holiness into the world he is leaving behind.”^v

She notes that he begins his historical review by reminding the Israelites of the times when they have sorely tested him. Rabbi Shanks writes, “He begins his exhortation with a revelation of his own vulnerability and a judgment on the people who pushed him past his breaking point.”^{vi} That seems odd. For one thing, most people would not think of sharing vulnerability as a sign of strength. Our culture tends to punish leaders who admit uncertainty or confess to missteps, which are treated as signs of weakness.

But let’s consider Joseph. As a young man and favorite son, in a position of strength, Joseph alienates his brothers by recounting dreams in which they all bow down to him. Later, at the height of his vulnerability in prison, he responds to the Pharaoh’s cupbearer and baker with humility when they beg him to interpret their unsettling dreams, responding, “Surely interpretations are in God’s domain; but go ahead and tell them to me.”^{vii} Acknowledging his vulnerability, Joseph demonstrates his greatest strength, leading him to the pinnacle of power in Pharaoh’s court.

Second, we may well ask how Moses could be demonstrating strength by castigating others for their wrongdoing. Rabbi Shanks answers, “Mussar teaches that the *middah* of *g’vurah* [the soul-trait of strength,] is connected with strict judgment and thus must always be counter-balanced by *chesed* (‘loving-kindness’).^{viii} That makes sense. We do associate a “tough on crime” attitude with strength. Just as God is both just and merciful, so must we strive to act with both

strength and compassion. We must be wise, discerning the situations that call for strength and strict justice—and, even when we are in such a position, we are challenged to find ways to be kind in the process.

This week, we read about the sacrifices that our ancestors brought to the Temple in ancient Jerusalem. One offering was to be brought “when a person unwittingly incurs guilt in regard to any of Adonai’s commandments,” accidentally doing something forbidden.^{ix} Torah then begins delineating the prescribed sacrifices by focusing on “the anointed priest who has incurred guilt.”^x Imagine the vulnerability of the religious leader who acknowledges their own wrongdoing, however accidental, and accordingly brings a sacrifice in the sight of all the people.

Turning toward the impact on the people, viewing the vulnerability of their leader, humbled before God and the humanity, the priest’s sacrificial act would enhance the strength of the community. Everybody makes mistakes, especially unintentional transgressions. Individuals who see that the priest has made such errors will be more willing to confess that they have done the same. The process of sacrifice will free them of that burden of unintentional sin, enabling them to move forward with their lives and the performance of *mitzvot*, performing the “thou shalt’s,” not merely avoiding the “thou shalt not’s.”

Sitting with her beloved mother-in-law Estelle, Rabbi Shanks asks “which strengths she draws on now and which will help her in this new, and last phase of life. [Estelle responds:] ‘Appreciation and gratitude, those are the most important. I don’t dwell on the pain and disappointments. I’m lucky to get to say ‘thank you’ to all of you. I’m not afraid of what is ahead for me and I accept it is soon. But I don’t know yet how I will say goodbye. That is the hardest thing to do, the bravest thing I will do. I am gathering strength to say goodbye.’”

“‘So am I,’ [Rabbi Shanks replies], ‘So am I.’”^{xi}

Amen.

ⁱ Rabbi Judy Shanks, “*G’vurah—Strength: How Did All This Happen,*” *The Mussar Torah Commentary*, New York: CCAR Press, 2020, p. 275.

ⁱⁱ Shanks, p. 276.

ⁱⁱⁱ Zechariah 4:6.

^{iv} Rabbi Dovid Schwartz, “Profiles in Courage –BTs and the Trait of G’vurah,” April 30, 2019, [Profiles in Courage - BTs and the Trait of G’vurah - Beyond BT](#).

^v Shanks, p. 276.

^{vi} Shanks, p. 277.

^{vii} Genesis 40:8.

^{viii} Shanks, p. 277.

^{ix} Leviticus 4:2.

^x Leviticus 4:3.

^{xi} Shanks, p. 278.