

The *G'vurah* (Strength) of Annabelle Imber Tuck

Shabbat B'midbar 5784

June 7, 2024

Rabbi Barry H. Block

Two years ago this month, as Annabelle Tuck assumed the presidency of our congregation, I discussed three *middot*, soul-traits, that she possessed in beautiful balance. Those aspects of Annabelle's character would guide and empower her to lead our congregation effectively. Annabelle would be humble, in the Mussar sense of the word, meaning that she would neither shrink from her duties nor overreach. Nor would she let her role swell her head. Annabelle is patient, but not overly so, and I expected that she would give people time to carry out their duties, without letting things lie indefinitely. And Annabelle would share her *bitachon*, her trusting nature, with Congregation B'nai Israel—assuring us, even in the most challenging times, that we could take appropriate steps with confidence that, whatever the result, our congregation would thrive.

Looking back, I wonder how *chesed*, lovingkindness, wound up on that sermon's cutting room floor. Annabelle's caring and compassion have enhanced a sense of community here at Temple. More than a few people feel welcomed and loved at Congregation B'nai Israel because of the multitudinous ways that Annabelle has cared for them.

And how could I not have spoken about Annabelle's *tzedek*, her disposition toward justice? After all, she is best known for her career, seeking and dispensing justice, and she wrote the chapter on *tzedek* in *The Mussar Torah Commentary*! So many situations have arisen over the last two years, calling on Annabelle to make decisions, pursuing paths of righteousness—whether choosing between multiple wonderful opportunities or needing to let somebody know that they had missed the mark. As one who needs to be on the receiving end of that from time to time, I can attest that Annabelle is expert at delivering a rebuke lovingly.

On other occasions, Annabelle has had to select the least unpalatable among an array of less-than-ideal options. Life is not always a bed of roses, and that's also true in the life of a congregation. One may be tempted to throw up one's hands or put on blinders when faced with bad choices, but Annabelle had been there before, many times, on the bench and in other aspects of her life, and that experience has served our congregation well.

Let me mention two unhappy circumstances that Annabelle had to confront—when her *tzedek*, her sense of justice and righteousness, redounded to the congregation's credit.

As she entered the presidency, Annabelle knew, as did the Board, a sad fact that could not be made public at that time: Our congregation’s leadership had embarked on a rabbinical ethics journey that was likely to be divisive. When we received an apology from the CCAR about a matter that took place in the 1980s—and then, an Ethics Committee decision March 2023—Annabelle could have chosen to keep the matters quiet. Yes, the latter would be on a public website, but one could hope that few in our congregation or in Central Arkansas would see it.

All the while, an entirely different matter has faced our congregation sharply throughout Annabelle’s presidency—the challenges of our magnificent but aging building. Over the course of decades, repairs have been made when systems have failed. However, just as in most of our homes, maintenance and modernization have sometimes been deferred when money did not absolutely have to be spent.

In both cases, Annabelle made tough decisions with only bad options. She chose the welfare of survivors and potential future victims at the risk of disharmony in the congregation. She has advocated for addressing the wellbeing of our facility, as we approach our fiftieth anniversary on Rodney Parham Road, despite knowing that will require funding that is not currently in the congregation’s coffers. Annabelle has also indicated that work on our Temple’s infrastructure, though largely a matter that’s far outside her historic expertise, will remain a focus of her volunteer leadership of our congregation.

In both cases, Annabelle exhibited the *middah* of *tzedek*, the soul-trait of justice, weighing competing values and seeking input from both experts and Temple Board colleagues before articulating and executing a clear judgment. Still, another *middah* was at work in these cases and in so much of Annabelle’s leadership. That soul trait is *g’vurah*, strength.

In Judaism, strength is not measured in deadlifts or bench presses, though Annabelle does work out with a trainer. Instead, the Mishnah defines a strong person as one who overcomes their unworthy inclinations.ⁱ Most of us are inclined to avoid conflict—and even more, to find ways not to deliver bad news. Annabelle, like Moses before her, has mustered the *g’vurah*, the strength, to tell hard truths.

This week, we begin reading *B’midbar*, the Book of Numbers, which starts with a census but mostly recounts the repeated backsliding of the Children of Israel during their desert wanderings. Most of those narratives don’t reflect well on our forebears—or, in at least one case, on Moses. Still, at the end of his life, Moses retells those stories. Rabbi Judy Shanks explains: “As he reaches his final days, Moses both exploits and contains his undiminished *g’vurah* [strength]...It takes strength, fearlessness, and a reining in of the ego to offer unvarnished accounts of

moments of his own weakness and failures of leadership. With his own words and his silence, Moses seems to forgive himself for his mistakes, while simultaneously extending forgiveness and *chesed* [compassion] to those standing before him who have stumbled before and will surely stumble again.”ⁱⁱ

Mustering her strength, Annabelle has repeatedly declined to take the easy way out or to enable denial of challenges and disagreements. At the same time, she has been eager to hear the concerns of people on all sides of each issue, even when they have strongly disagreed with her decisions and actions. She has worked to assure that disagreements over matters of policy do not affect personal relationships, though she humbly recognizes that she cannot always control that.

Rabbi Shanks writes: “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 and tempered by *chesed* (“loving-kindness”).”ⁱⁱⁱ In both of the cases I described, Annabelle has made decisions that differed from those some of her predecessors. However, Annabelle has never criticized those past presidents or their decisions. She has *chesed*, compassion, for the circumstances in which they found themselves and has emphasized the degree to which issues have developed from the times when earlier decisions were made. In several cases, those same past presidents have indicated that, were they in her shoes now, they would like to think they would make the decisions she has now made.

Annabelle’s *bitachon*, her trust, that the Temple would thrive even in the aftermath of adversity, has been realized. At the Annual Meeting—in just eleven days, but who’s counting—I will have more to say about that about the happy place where we find our congregation only sixteen months after a real low point. With her balanced humility, her not-limitless patience, her abiding trust, her unimpeachable judgment, and her remarkable strength, Annabelle has brought great blessing to Congregation B’nai Israel. Now is our turn to return her blessings with love.

Amen.

ⁱ Mishnah Avot 4:1.

ⁱⁱ Rabbi Judy Shanks, “*G’vurah*—Strength: How Did All This Happen?” in *The Mussar Torah Commentary*, New York: CCAR Press, 2020, p. 277.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*