

Shabbat Shalom.

חֲזַק חֲזַק וְנִתְחַזַּק

This is what we say five times a year, as we complete each book of the Torah.  
Be strong, be strong, and may we be strengthened!

The phrase is derived from the first book of Joshua.  
When encouraging him to take on the mantle of leadership, God says, three times,

חֲזַק, וְאַמֵּץ

Be strong and courageous!

And in our Haftarah today, David charges Solomon,

וְחִזַּקְתָּ

and you shall be strong.

חֲזַק חֲזַק וְנִתְחַזַּק

The words Chazak! Chazak! are grammatically in the imperative; we are commanded to be strong.

חֲזַק

is singular

וְנִתְחַזַּק

is plural.

חֲזַק

is present tense

וְנִתְחַזַּק

is in the future.

These juxtapositions are meant for us to understand  
that it is the strength of each one of us,  
today,  
that vitalizes and invigorates the future  
of our entire community.

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In 2006, Sa'ar Ganor  
was walking along the shady terebinth trees  
in the Judean foothills,  
enjoying the dazzling blue and yellow wildflowers  
near the brook in the Elah valley.

On a low hill, overlooking the valley from the North,  
he saw what appeared to be  
the top edge of a huge boulder  
showing through the ground.

Sa'ar Ganor was not just anyone walking along the trail,  
he was a trained archeologist from the Israel Antiquities Authority.

He convinced his Hebrew University professor, Yosi Garfinkel,  
to excavate the area,  
and what they found over the next seven years  
was heralded  
as singular and exceptional!

They found a fortress, with stones 1-3 meters long, weighing 3-5 tons each,  
in a circle, forming a perimeter wall  
2,300 feet around.  
Megaliths were stacked six meters high,  
taking an estimated 200,000 tons of rock to build.

Two gates were discovered in the wall,  
one on the western side of the city, the other on the south-east.  
Each gate had a large, public gathering area,  
as well as a room for ritual activity.

Within the fortress was an inner wall,  
with homes built abutting it.

Within the homes, there were hundreds of pottery jars,  
marked with a single fingerprint on the handles.  
And there were burnt olive pits,  
28 of which were sent for carbon 14 dating.  
The archeological and historical communities were shocked,  
when all of the olive pits were dated around 1000 BCE.  
1000 BCE!  
3000 years ago!  
and a mere 300 years after the exodus from Egypt.

The Elah valley, 3000 years ago,  
was a buffer zone between the hill country of Judah to the East,  
and the coastal plain of the Philistines to the West.

The urban planning, with houses abutting casement walls, was unique to the kingdom of Judah.  
The pottery, with handles adorned with a single fingerprint, was unique to the kingdom of Judah.

At the site, they found 12,000 animal bones  
goats, sheep, cows, and fish.  
In the city of Gath, 7 miles to the West, they found many pig and dog bones, but there was not even one pig or dog bone in this excavation.  
And there were no human or animal images, even in the ritual areas.

All this evidence strongly identifies this site as a fortress of the Kingdom of Judah, around the time of the reign of King Saul.

The organization, tools, and personnel needed to build such a tremendous structure immediately suggests a strong, centralized government.  
The lack of pig bones and the lack of graven images are particularly interesting; these traditions were obviously part of Judahite culture, even 3000 years ago.



In 2008, a pottery shard was found near the city gate by a teenage volunteer during a dig.

Here were five lines in faded ink, poorly preserved and difficult to decipher. The letters were in the proto-Canaanite alphabet, which was an alphabet repurposed from Egyptian hieroglyphics and was the precursor of Hebrew, Moabite, Phoenician, and others. The first five letters say al ta'as 'You shall not do it,' immediately indicating the language as Hebrew.

The finding of the ostrakon was so important, a new software was developed to decipher all the possible text variations, using the fragments of clear letters available.

It starts, You shall not do it, but worship God.

There is consensus on the words judge, widow, and king,  
but the other letters are difficult to read,  
and there is debate as to what the full inscription says.

Using the software and highly sophisticated scanning and imaging of the inscription,  
the opinions of two experts seemed most likely.

It is what these two people saw,  
out of the myriad of possibilities,  
that is so captivating and compelling to me.

They each saw something different,  
likely influenced by their experiences, upbringing, and education.  
And what they saw  
is the inspiration for this d'var.

[Émile Puech](#) (uh-meel puish)  
is a French catholic priest  
and an expert of biblical archeologic scrolls.

He saw the text written in the context  
of the transition from judges to kings.  
He thought the ostrakon was a message from Jerusalem,  
announcing the ascent of Saul to the throne:

The judge and the widow wept.  
He had power over them.  
The men and the chiefs have established a king.

[Gershon Galil](#)  
is a Professor of Biblical Studies and Ancient History at [Haifa University](#).  
He saw the text as a social statement  
relating to strangers, widows and orphans:

Do not judge the widow, the orphan or the stranger.  
Rehabilitate the poor at the hands of the king.

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The Torah warns us 12 times  
to have special consideration for the widow and the orphan,  
most vehemently in (Shemot 22:21-23):

You shall not oppress any widow or orphan.  
If you oppress them, and they call out to me,  
I shall surely hear their cry.

My anger shall flare and I shall kill you with the sword;

then

your wives shall be widows  
and your children orphans.

I am not an epigrapher,  
I am not a biblical scholar,  
I am not a linguist,  
and I am not an archeologist,  
so I cannot speculate  
as to the comparative virtues of these translations.

But what I can tell you  
is how very deeply  
these things resonate with me:  
the need to protect the vulnerable  
to advocate for the marginalized  
and to include, equally, all members of society.

Every life is sacred.  
This is what I was taught,  
this is what I have learned  
and this is what I love about being Jewish.

I feel certain that  
for Gershon Galil  
raised in our tradition,  
these morals resonated strongly as well.

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In the ancient world, the passage of time  
was marked by light and darkness,  
the rising and setting of the sun,  
the waxing and waning of moon.

The genius of the Torah,  
in a world where heavenly bodies were deified,  
was to acknowledge their grandeur,  
and to celebrate them....  
But not as gods,  
rather,  
as precious gifts  
from God.

And, it was not just the heavenly bodies  
that were gifts from God,  
but the entire universe,  
and all within it,  
was God's creation.

Every living thing is holy.  
Human beings were created in the image of God.  
And everyone has a Divine spark within.  
The sanctity of life requires  
that every person be treated with dignity,  
and every life be endowed with meaning.

Justice, compassion, and equality before the law  
follow logically.  
Kindness to others, caring for those more vulnerable,  
striving for peace, and yearning to improve the world  
were commanded in the Torah.  
Nothing like this was ever written before.  
These are the living ideals of our people  
and the legacy we have left to the world.

Even in exile, the Torah was considered Divine,  
and Jews, dispersed throughout the world,  
continued to revere and cherish it.

For thousands of years,  
without a country of our own,  
wherever we were,  
we maintained a strong Jewish identity,  
even in the face of harrowing obstacles and threats.  
Nothing like this had ever occurred before in history.

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The Torah reflects sacred intentions  
that continue to develop, even today.  
It serves as an eternal wellspring,  
moving us to seek the most moral and humane way to live.

We have treasured its ancient words  
and continued to scribe them in scroll after scroll,  
generation after generation  
from the time we first received it,  
until now.

The Torah is a gift to us from God, and from our ancestors  
and the Torah is a gift  
from us  
to our descendants.

Our current Torah scrolls are approaching the end of their usability.  
We need to provide a new Torah scroll for our Kahal,  
and we need to assure a thriving and vibrant Jewish community into the future.

A Torah scroll is much more than a scroll.  
It is everything the Torah signifies:  
the holiness of life,  
our special relationship with God,  
acts of kindness,  
yearning for peace,  
passion for justice,  
Tzedakah,  
tikkun olam,  
and the value of community.

A Torah scroll is much more than a scroll.  
It is the sanctity of life.  
It is the traditions of our people.  
It is our strong Jewish identity  
that has persisted in the face of unthinkable odds.  
It is the living ideals of our people  
and the legacy we have given to the world.

We need to provide a new Torah scroll for our Kahal,  
and we need to endow an infrastructure  
to assure that we can preserve  
our beautiful, rich, and vibrant heritage.

We are about to come upon the 75th anniversary of Beth Israel Center,  
a major milestone in the life of our Kahal.

Our flourishing and vibrant community  
now has an opportunity,  
and an obligation,  
to uphold the values and ideals of the Torah,  
as we celebrate our first 75 years,  
and plan for the next 75.

חֲזַק חֲזַק וְנִתְחַזַּק

Be strong, be strong, and may we be strengthened!

חֲזַק

is an imperative to be strong.

But,

חֲזַק

has another meaning as well.

Think of

עַץ חַיִּים הַיָּא לְמַחְזִיקִים בָּהּ

to uphold, to hold fast, to preserve

May we uphold the Torah,  
its ideals, and everything it stands for,  
as it preserves us, our community, and our people.

May our love for Torah  
be an inspiration to us.  
May we embrace it and uphold it,  
and may we all  
be strengthened by it.

Shabbat Shalom.