

**Rabbi Jonathan Aaron – Yom Kippur 5776**  
**When do we need strength?**

From the very moment that we decided upon the theme of “*hazak hazak v'nithazek: From Strength to Strength, we strengthen each other,*” I have become a little obsessed with the idea of a person’s strength. *Hazak*. When do we need it? Why do we need it? Who needs it? *Hazak*. Does it mean to cover up weakness, like, “be strong” because no one should see when we aren’t? Is strength even a desirable attribute, or has it been imposed on us by society?

The notion of physical strength is clear to me...how else can you open up a jar of apple sauce, or carry a child out of the car into the house after a long drive? But mental strength? Emotional strength? Spiritual strength? These strengths are difficult to describe or define, because they are expressed in so many different ways. We need them most when we have lost our balance in our lives. When an event, or action, or emotion or a realization occurs that just throws us off balance.

Lets do a little experiment.

**WE ARE GOING TO STAND ON ONE FOOT**

Please take off your shoes, or just the shoe of the foot you want to use.

I’d like everyone to please rise –

Standing on both feet. You’re balanced, strong.

Pick a spot to concentrate

When I say, raise one leg so that the foot is just off the ground, at about the ankle

Ready. Let’s stand on one foot (everyone tries)

I want you to pay attention to your foot.

Feel the muscles trying to find the balance.

One is strong, then the other.

Look how our entire body is trying to allow us to stand on this one foot.

Much harder with eyes closed.

O.K. One more experiment. Let’s try it one more time. Together.

One Foot

(after a moment) Now, put your hand on the shoulder to your right (or left if there is no right).

Now pay attention to how that feels.  
You can sit, I don't want to tire you out with calisthenics on Yom Kippur.

That's what happens to us when we are out of balance on the inside. . When there's imbalance due to countless situations and reasons, our inner strength pushes and pulls from all angles, just like our foot muscles, until we can find that balance again. And please believe me when I say: I understand that the balancing act inside is not easily accomplished.

Drs. Martin Seligman, a past president of the American Psychological Association and Christopher Peterson, a professor at Michigan spent three years researching the character strengths of human beings. They found six categories of character virtues with 24 strengths to accompany them. They are:

1. Knowledge and wisdom – Creativity, Curiosity, Open-mindedness, Love of learning, Perspective
2. Courage – Bravery, Persistence, Integrity, Vitality
3. Humanity – Love, Kindness, Social intelligence
4. Justice – Citizenship, Fairness, Leadership
5. Temperance – Forgiveness and mercy, Humility/Modesty, Prudence, Self-regulation (self-control)
6. Transcendence – Appreciation of Beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, Spirituality

How do I know which strengths I need at what times? I don't think I have to consciously know at all. When we stood on one foot, none of us were consciously thinking of moving this muscle or that muscle in our foot, or our bodies. There are 20 muscles in the foot. The study points out 24 points of inner strength. Just like the brain shoots a message to each muscle flexing or relaxing to find that balance point,

our inner strength is subconsciously firing signals at us so that we can, in time, find what we need.

Here is how I see most of our lives on the surface: crazy non-stop schedules of places to go, people to see, text, things to do, emails, and stuff to pick up, texts, places to go back to, more email, other people to see, texts, more things, facebook, and stuff to get, Linkdin, and more people and places and calls, and email, and food, facebook, and stuff, and people. You need 53 strengths just to keep up with that. That's just our regular surface day. Some people in this room are suffering each and every day, and need strength just to get out of bed. We say to them: *Hazak*

I'm sure that there are many whose days are not so stressful, and there are others who would say it's worse than that. Suffice to say, all of us have a tremendous volume of activities and responsibilities weighing us down every single day, especially in 2015, with the added beauty and burden of technology. That's the surface layer. We start with "x" amount of stress from our everyday events and scheduling. Underneath that base are layers and layers of emotional stresses.

The first layers underneath our surface are social. World events and personal events. The world is so much smaller now, and anything that goes on anywhere has an impact on us. The Iranian Nuclear Agreement debate caused a tremendous amount of real tension. The refugee problem in Europe and Syria, and elsewhere on

our planet, causes real concern. The ongoing problems in Africa, the ongoing problems in America, all of this can weigh heavily upon our lives.

There are also those times when we are effected by personal events. Losing employment or large sums of money in the market, splitting up from a long time partner, business or personal. Having a falling out with a long time friend, difficulties with family. These world events and personal issues can weigh heavily in our minds and our hearts. Many of us in this room are suffering from this, and are in need of strength. We say to them: *Hazak*

In a Gallup-Healthways poll in 2013, it was shown that forty-seven percent of the people surveyed had some kind of chronic pain: 47%. 31% have neck or back condition, 26% had leg or knee condition, 18% have another chronic condition. 7% said they experience all three kinds of chronic pain. I have lived with chronic back pain for over 20 years, and I understand what it does inside. It's hard to believe that almost half the people in this room are suffering from some kind of chronic pain every single day, and need inner strength. We say to them: *Hazak*

I don't need any statistics to show me how much all of us are influenced by illness. It touches every single human being in the world, never mind every person in this room. Even false alarms with negative test results can cause stress. And it radiates from family, and friends, and co-workers. So many need care and love and support. They suffer from this burden. They need strength. We say to them: *Hazak*

We especially need strength when we lose those we love. Today is that day we come together and remember all of those who came before us. We will read a list of names of those members of this congregation who have died in the last year. There is another list as well, an extremely long list in the Yizkor booklets, representing all of our family members who have gone from us. For the families of those listed, the memory of that loss carries sadness, and for many of us to read those names, people with whom we shared life, it brings a melancholy of spirit. In life, there are never-ending reminders that we are mortal, and one day, we will be here without a loved one. Some in this room are suffering from loss, and are in need of strength. We say to them: *Hazak*

We need to muster up our strength daily. Imbalance can come from our every day tasks, but then add those other layers: our world and personal crises, chronic pain, mental illness, disease, and loss. It doesn't matter if it is you yourself who is afflicted, or you are close to someone or many who are stricken by any of these, you are suffering. You don't carry it on a sandwich board over your back. It isn't listed in the paper or online. It is a silent suffering.

This is life. It is the reality of our existence. It *has* been as far back as human beings have been on this earth. Abraham alienated and abandoned three families. Isaac is consumed by familial rivalry. Jacob lives with a chronic hip, and endures the death of his son, and Joseph is forced into slavery. The human life has always had a

complicated set of experiences that cause stress and tension. We have always used those 24 inner strength muscles constantly to endure the pain and difficulties that arise in life, and bring us back into balance, so that we can live our lives with some kind of harmony.

Since it has always been that way for all human beings, you must know this: you are not alone. Sometimes we want to believe that our problems and weights are unique and are exclusive. They *are* unique: no two lives are the same, no two situations are exactly the same. But you *aren't* alone. Or should I say, you don't have to be. It takes ten to make a shiva minyan, why? Because we strengthen each other. We say our loved ones names during the prayer for healing, why? Because we strengthen each other. The person next to you is suffering, I'm suffering, you're suffering. You are not alone. It is easier to stand on one foot when your hand is on the shoulder of the person next to you. Ecclesiastes wrote: "Two are better off than one...For should they fall, one can raise the other...also, if one attacks, two can stand up to him. A threefold cord is not readily broken."

You have family, you have friends, you have this congregation. Use them, use us, break your silence, you are not weak because you suffer, but you will need others to become balanced once again. And it will take all of your strengths, all 24: Creativity, Curiosity, Open-mindedness, Love of learning, Perspective, Bravery, Persistence, Integrity, Vitality, Love, Kindness, Social intelligence, Citizenship, Fairness,

Leadership, Forgiveness and mercy, Humility/Modesty, Prudence, Self-control,  
Appreciation of Beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, Spirituality.

May we move from day to day, person to person, strength to strength, and endure  
together, through the strength we give to and gather from each other.