

The Heart-Strength to Act Despite the Darkness

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Shanah tovah. I pray that with all that is new or hard on these High Holy Days, despite any challenges with technology and the reality for many of being alone, you are managing to make this holy day as good as it can be. Right now, please, take a few deep breaths and be here, fully here on this Shabbat Rosh Hashanah day.

These Days of Awe are here for us to lift up our courage, faith, and compassion.

We will be hearing more about faith and compassion. Today I want to center our focus on the courage that is needed for ourselves and our world. In Hebrew it is *ometz lev*, which can be translated as heart strength.

You have so much strength even when it feels you do not. And even when you truly do not, there is a spark of strength within that you can always access.

Ometz lev, courage, is a core Jewish *middah*, an ethical and spiritual trait that we naturally have as beings created in the Divine image. As a contemporary teacher, Rabbi Mark Margolius instructs, “even those who consider themselves fearful or anxious can access the quality of *ometz lev* in any given moment. We practice *ometz lev* whenever we leave our comfort zone, take an unpopular stand, expose our vulnerabilities, speak the truth, confront others, risk embarrassment or personal loss, or intervene on behalf of those unable to do so for themselves.”

And the world needs that heart-strength of yours. It needs you to not be lulled into disconnection because of quarantine or into the depths of sadness with the devastation of this pandemic. We may, right now, be alone or with the chaos of kids, either making action hard. We may feel paralyzed because the problems are so great. And even when we manage to act, we can get stuck feeling that we cannot make enough of a difference with the changes in the climate or inequities in our society or against forces of autocracy.

Your resilience despite the obstacles is required and finding ways to work together even as we are apart. Hemingway writes in his Farewell to Arms, “Life breaks all of us. Some grow strong at the broken places.” That is heart strength, *ometz lev*.

Our Shabbat prayerbook *Mishkan T'filah* has a prayer that we rarely say out loud. It is in the midst of our silent Amidah, our standing prayer. Even on the day of rest, Shabbat, and even today on our New Year, we are challenged with these words which I invite Mount Zion's president Michael Kuhne to read:

Disturb us, Adonai, ruffle us from our complacency; make us dissatisfied.¹

¹ The idea of using this prayer and the quote from Sir Frances Drake at the end come from Rabbi Jeff Salkin.

Dissatisfied with the peace of ignorance, the quietude which arises from a shunning of the horror, the defeat, the bitterness and the poverty, physical and spiritual, of humans.

Shock us, Adonai, deny to us the false Shabbat which gives us the delusions of satisfaction amid a world of war and hatred;

Wake us, O God, and shake us from the sweet and sad poignancies rendered by half-forgotten melodies and rubric prayers of yesteryears;

Make us know that the border of the sanctuary is not the border of living and the walls of Your temples are not shelters from the winds of truth, justice and reality.

Disturb us, O God, and vex us; let not Your Shabbat be a day of torpor and slumber; let it be a time to be stirred and spurred to action.

There is much to be vexed by. The question is what will we have the courage to do? Next Rosh Hashanah, how will you look back on this year to come? There is so much at stake. Will we have done enough? Will we have tried even when we felt powerless?

I want to share a first-hand account of a time in the 1930s when the powers of evil were great, not to draw an analogy, but to acknowledge with realism, that it is easy to look back about what we would have done. But would we have? It is in some people's human nature to minimize challenges. Our heart-strength needs to be with our eyes wide-open.

In 1938, Rabbi Harry Sterling Margolis had already served Mount Zion as its rabbi for over thirteen years when world events demanded much from all people as powerless as they felt.

Here is what he said on Rosh Hashanah Morning that year, 1938, two months before Kristallnacht:

I deprecate the constant beating of our breasts and I deplore the self-castigation. Is there any people on the face of God's earth today that has shown and exhibited greater heroism under duress, a greater spirit of sacrifice, a greater loyalty to its weaker and most suffering brothers, a deeper sense of solidarity than our people. And I am glad to know that we are rapidly banishing from our ranks in these times the mood of defeatism and despair. For no people is at its best when it is frightened. One cannot appeal to the generosity of the people when they are terrified. These difficult days have renewed the spirit of hope which the prophets of Israel always brought to their people in the dark nights of suffering: *AL TIRA AVDI YAAKOV* – do not be afraid, my servant Jacob. Jewish life is not liquidating anywhere on the face of the earth. "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, even when thou shalt pass through the deep waters I shall be with thee and the fires which are kindled against thee will not consume thee."

This is the actual paper he held (holding his sermon in hand) when he delivered that sermon: "...[D]o not be afraid, my servant Jacob. Jewish life is not liquidating anywhere on the face of the earth." I shudder reading those words written on the eve of the Shoah.

How our people has always held onto hope.

The next year, after the war broke out, he spoke on Kol Nidre²:

We meet tonight in the darkest period of our people's history. There is hardly a record in our long-checkered career as a people to compare with what is going on in Jewish life today. For the first time in centuries our brethren in various parts of the world have been unable to hold Holy Day services. In many Polish communities, synagogues and schools are used to house the unfortunate and the distressed. Approximately two million of Poland's 3,300,000 Jews are already under Nazi domination.

And then he continued later with another message of hope:

When his people were distressed beyond words and burdened with tragedy and suffering, when dense darkness had descended upon the earth and there seemed no hope, the same Jeremiah who asked on another occasion: "Is there no balm in Gilead," comforted and strengthened his people in these words which I pray may be our hope and comfort in the days ahead: "Behold the days come saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel and with the House of Judah...."

A year later, in 1940, his sermon opened with:

We are living in a world of incredible darkness and confusion. We know little of what is going on, and what we know we find it difficult to understand.

Shock us, Adonai, deny to us the false Shabbat which gives us the delusions of satisfaction amid a world of war and hatred;

There is no denying real hatreds. Sometimes the forces are overwhelming and what can we do? On this Rosh Hashanah, I speak of courage, yet I feel challenged. Rabbi Margolis died from cancer a year after World War II ended -- just shy of his 50th birthday. In a very different time today, I cannot help but be reflective. I think about my family. I think about my own life, my 50th birthday this past year.

Shock us? Disturb us? Are you kidding? I have enough on my plate just to get through this day. "Life breaks all of us. Some grow strong at the broken places."

Chazak veematz are the only words Moses offers Joshua his successor. Be strong and of good courage. In every generation, we face our realities and try to muster our courage.

Our Shabbat prayer ends: **let it be a time to be stirred and spurred to action.** We need the heart strength, the *ometz lev*, to face this coming year and to find a way to make a difference.

² Sept 22, 1939 – Yom Kippur Eve

Rabbi Margolis concluded his address to an annual meeting of the congregation in 1940:

Men and women of Mount Zion, we need no new techniques to face these difficult days. It is not enough for us to accept passively the evils of our time or vigorously to affirm our innocence of evil. What is needed is a ringing affirmation of our Jewish faith, our Jewish devotion and re-consecration to the religious ideals of our Torah.³

His message was a rekindling of our ancient wisdom. Our people has known many dark days and persevered with *ometz lev* and with hope despite the darkness around us.

Start with yourself, deepening commitments to the truths of our ancient wisdom, and then reach out with the smallest act of kindness. It will radiate love, hope, and possibility. Will it be sufficient? I don't know. Will it help? There is no doubt. And there are people in our community for whom even small acts are a challenge. Part of our work together is to hold everyone in our hearts and support each person who is not able to act. We know this; we accept this; and it is ok.

For those who can do more, much more is needed. Be mindful of the words of Rabbi Tarfon: "The day is short, the work is much...and the master of the house is insistent... It is not incumbent upon you to finish the task, but neither are you free to absolve yourself from it."⁴

We need to be bold and creative and then act. That is the heart-strength required to face the darkness of today. "We practice *ometz lev* whenever we leave our comfort zone, take an unpopular stand, expose our vulnerabilities, speak the truth, confront others, risk embarrassment or personal loss, or intervene on behalf of those unable to do so for themselves."

The British explorer Sir Frances Drake concluded his prayer entitled, *Disturb us, Lord*, with these words:

Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly, to venture on wider seas,
Where storms will show your mastery;
Where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars.
We ask you to push back the horizons of our hopes,
And to push into the future in strength, courage, hope and love.

This is a moment of decision, to be disturbed in the way that religion is meant to stir our souls. What will you say next Rosh Hashanah about what you decided to do? Will you find the heart-strength to act?

³ April 15, 1940 "Annual message of the rabbi presented at the eighty-third annual meeting."

⁴ Pirke Avot (Ethics of our Ancestors) 2:15-16