Hazak, Hazak V'nithazek
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz – June 3, 2016

Parashat Behukotai continues the quest for holiness through God's law, which is the hallmark of the Book of Leviticus of which it is the concluding parasha.

Following the recitation of Leviticus 27:34, we will chant "Hazak, hazak, v'nithazek," "May we go from strength to strength and be strengthened."

This traditional declaration marks the conclusion of reading each book of the Torah. Once an expression of support for the Torah reader himself at the end of each aliyah, it now marks our transition as we shift from the strength we derive from reading one book to the strength we will derive from the next.

It's a beautiful Jewish blessing, it echoes the words that Moses says to Joshua when he passes the mantle of leadership: Hazak v'ematz, strength and courage

BUT it's not often this way, in fact quite often we don't go from strength to strength but rather

- from strength to weakness.
- From feeling on top of the world to being knocked low to the bottom of the pit
- Far from strength and courage – its is often fear and disillusionment that crowd out our hopes and dreams.

Strength and courage seem to be so much preferred over the alternative, but are they really.

Where does true growth and learning occur? Not when we succeed but of course when we fail, when we overcome fear and disappointment.

Abraham Joshua Heschel taught, "The most valuable insights into the human situation have been gained not through introspection or scrutiny, but rather through [the] surprise and shock of dramatic failure." Indeed, it is usually in the wake of

frustration, in moments of crisis and self-disillusionment, and rarely out of astonishment at our achievements, that radical self-awareness comes to pass.

Author and theologian, David W. Jones reminds us of this in his poem: Sometimes…

Sometimes doubt is the opposite of faith, but sometimes doubt can be a pathway to faith.

Sometimes weakness is the opposite of strength, but sometimes weakness can be the pathway to strength.

Sometimes addiction is the opposite of sobriety, but sometimes addiction can be the pathway to sobriety.

Sometimes infidelity is the opposite of fidelity, but sometimes infidelity can be a pathway to fidelity.

Sometimes failure is the opposite of success, but sometimes failure can be the pathway to success.

All that separates the book of Leviticus which we end tomorrow and the book of Numbers which we begin on Monday are three blank lines in the Torah scroll.

They might as well be the Red Sea or from the earth to the moon or from wherever we are right now to where ever we want to be next.

We are constantly standing on shores trying to figure out how to cross over to the other side.

- And so we chant Hazak, hazak, v'nithazek
- NOT because we have strength and courage, but because in that moment we don't.
- When the story ends, when the string is played out, we lose our mooring and our direction.

Maybe sometimes we are fortunate to easily jump from one thing to the next. But more often we are unsure, uncertain, uncomfortable with the unknown.

If we have learned anything in this pandemic it is to EMBRACE the discomfort, the uncertainty, even the fear, because from it comes the most miraculous thing, from fear comes curiosity. In Hebrew the word is סַקְרָנוּת – its root means to question or investigate.

“The most successful remedy for fear has been throughout time, curiosity”, wrote Cambridge historian Theodore Zeldin.

It is only boundless curiosity that can be effective against fear. Zeldin taught that one of sciences most important discoveries about fear is that its physical symptoms, in terms of the chemicals produced to defend the body, differ only by degree from those produced by curiosity. And that is why those who

are fully absorbed in achieving a goal behave as though they are profoundly courageous.

But it is not courage, rather curiosity / סַקְרָנוּת that moves us forward. I am fearful of the 'new normal', but I am also deeply curious about how humanity will navigate this moment, and I like many of you would prefer to shape it than to be shaped by it. That one some humble level is courage.

The great Chassidic master Reb Nachman of Bratslav taught *Kol haolam kulo gesher tzar m'oad.* The whole world he said is a very narrow bridge. v'hayikar lolefached klal. But the most important part is not to be afraid.

Fear begets curiosity and curiosity propels us forward along the very narrow bridge of life, across those three blank lines in the Torah scroll to the unknown and unlimited possibilities of the other side, to the rest of the story.

Think of all the advances we have made in science, in industry, in medicine, just in these three short months. Nearly all have their impetus in fear, fear of what life will be like if we cannot concur this disease and its ancillary afflictions of economic collapse and global instability. Yet the product, the innovation, the collaboration, those are the result of curiosity, of asking the question, what if? - and then taking that inquisitive step out along the path.

When Reb Nachman made his observation about the world being a narrow bridge, he himself had just endured a fearful and harrowing experience. Nachman more than anything else in his life wanted to travel to the land of Israel, a journey that in the medieval age in which he lived was fraught with peril and hardship. But it was an essential value of Nachman's life, that one's duty in this world is to ever do battle with the physical and mental barriers that oppress and enslave the soul. To overcome fear with curiosity so that it might foster in him courage and hope.

Thus, at great personal risk he made the journey to Israel. It was a dreadful trip, it cost him his life's fortune, he was held hostage, his boat was nearly swamped at sea not once but twice. Yet upon his arrival in the land of Israel, Reb Nachman said to his students.

"I believe, and indeed I know well, that of all the movements, thoughts and deeds that one undertakes in order to perform some holy and necessary act, not a single one is ever wasted. For after all the obstacles have been broken through and the act has been completed, all those internal struggles that took place while one was still weighing the act… are elevated to the highest state of holiness. Everything is recorded in heaven above for the good, including every move one had to make along the way. Blessed are those who manage to overcome all the obstacles and to complete some good deeds." (Green p.82)

Nachman teaches through his own example that the product of curiosity is not only the conquering of fear, but the perspective of renewed hope which comes when we free up our souls from those things that so constrict and constrain the very essence of our being.

When we confront and subdue our fears, we give ourselves the freedom and the ability to dream again. Anything becomes possible. The whole world may indeed be a very narrow bridge, but when curiosity triumphs over fear, courage and hope springs eternal and we desire only to keep walking, moving forward along the next narrow bridge, the next three blank lines in the Torah scroll.

The root of Judaism, maybe the purpose of being a human is walking out along that narrow and rickety bridge. That is the daily test and struggle of our very existence, so that we don't live our lives in fear but are guided by an unceasing curiosity to know, to experience. To be emboldened and empowered by a

deeply rooted courage that moves us forward along the narrow bridge of life. To stand upon the other side of our fear and to allow ourselves to dream, to hope unfettered - a free person. To recite every morning the blessing, *Baruch attah adonay eloheinu melech haolam she asani ben horin*. Praised are you adonai my God, master of your own domain, who has made me master of my own life, who created me to be free.

Henaini, Here I am, of meager strength and confronted by fear of the unknown, but I am not defenseless, I am curious, I am not done living, learning, growing. So, I will step out on to the rickety bridge and take those first hesitant steps to cross over. Then in time and not without stumbling along the way, I will; having crossed the bridge, stand upon on the distant shore, free of at least that one fear. Imagine the view, what a grand perspective - filled with wonder and hope.

Hazak, hazak, v'סַקְרָנוּת ," "May we go from strength to strength and may you have boundless curiosity.