

Power
Kol Nidrei 2017
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A young man at a construction site was strutting as he exclaimed, "I am the strongest of all you. I can lift concrete, wield a heavy drill, and haul a metal beam on my back!" His coworkers looked away as he boasted. He then stared at the one of the older workers. "Ha!" he yelled. "You can barely lift anything! You are past your prime!" After several minutes of ranting, the older worker just had enough.

"Why don't you put your money where your mouth is and challenge me to a strength competition," he said. "I will bet an entire week's pay that I can haul something in a wheelbarrow over to that building that you won't be able to wheel back."

"You're on, old man. Let's see what you got," the young boaster replied.

The old man reached out and grabbed the wheelbarrow by the handles. Then, nodding to the young man, he said, "All right, hop in."¹

Might, power, strength; have you thought about what these terms mean? Is it about physical prowess, lifting heavy weights, or forcing people to do your will? When do you feel powerful? I feel most formidable when I come from behind at a racquetball game. Even though I've been losing, I will myself not to give up, and then if there is a comeback, sweetness! Any racquetball players out there? You know what I'm talking about. When I win, I feel strong, powerful, and almost heroic. I feel this way when I climb mountains as well. During my college days, I'll admit that it was important for me to be just as good as the men at karate. As I attained my brown belt in Shotokan, blue belt in Tai Kwan Do, and completed a year of Aiki Jitsu, I took pride in the bruises on my arms and legs. It's hard not to associate power with physical feats of strength. But as we are aware there are different kinds of power.

Do you know we just chanted a prayer about the power of God in the Gevurah? Gevurah means might. We said, "*ata gibor l'olam, Adonai*, you are mighty O'God." What does it mean in this prayer for God to be powerful? It says that God can heal the sick, lift up the fallen, bring dew in the summer and rain in the winter, free the captive, give life, and in the traditional words of this prayer, "*mechaye metim*, resurrect the dead. Wow! Bringing the dead back to life? That's power. Do you believe in a God who can do that? One of the names of God is El Shaddai, the mighty God. Does God have power or might? We all have differing ideas on what God is or isn't just as I'm sure we do on power. Personally, I don't believe in an all-powerful God, not even an omniscient one. So the image of power doesn't really do it for me. However, I do believe there is the power of creation and that life has great potency for meaning.

Let's come down from the celestial heavens and explore power in the human realm. Have you ever been in a situation where you were able to make a change, state an excellent rebuttal, or

affect the course of your workplace, school, or local government? It's a powerful feeling indeed to be able to affect change for the good. It feels amazing to be able to make a difference. I don't take for granted the work that Temple member, Laurie Cantus, did in getting the city of Westminster to paint the curb red by our driveway. Did any of you notice how dangerous it was turning left on Hefley out of our parking lot? For many years, large vehicles blocked our view of the street putting our people at risk of a terrible car accident. Laurie didn't take no for an answer and she arranged for us to go before the traffic commission and advocate for the safety of our congregants and the people in the neighborhood. A number of our members and staff wrote letters and showed up at this meeting to advocate for our synagogue. This is power. The power to change the color of a curb. And when we use power for good, well, remarkable things can happen.

I found myself reflecting on notions of power over the years in politics. My history professor, Dr. Martin Cohen, at rabbinical school spoke about real power and apparent power. He taught us that even though you may see those in positions of leadership as powerful that is not really the case. He taught that those who are generally out front, i.e., president, leaders, and even rabbis have apparent power. People think we can do what we want but that is far from the truth. Those with the real power, are generally in the shadows, you may not necessarily know their names, but they are the ones with real influence and true power to impact things.

In class, we looked at historical events and tried to identify the real issues behind conflict, what were the things that rallied the masses, and what was the real issue being fought over. I was one of the students who was very excited by these insights and I've found them applicable not just to synagogue life but organizations in general and governance. Really, it's a fun exercise to look at, oh let's say school politics. Who is the one who influences the teacher, principal, or superintendent? Is it a person on the school board, a parent, or the PTA president? We have to remember that no one leads alone. If you can effectively identify who has the real power, then you can possibly influence him or her. If you can identify the core issues at stake, then you have the power of understanding and then you can be more effective in bringing about change.

In speaking about power, I have to mention the late Max Sudakow, zichrono l'vracha. I had a number of meetings with him over the years and I found it interesting to see how important power was to him. He didn't say these things directly but I inferred his beliefs from our conversations. Max had a very hierarchical view of power in the work place, organizations, and in synagogues. Who was on top, who was number one, was very important to him. He believed that such a person could then do what they wanted. He took personal pride the things he had done for our Temple over the years. I found myself pondering his ideas of power and how it was an important part of his life.

I experienced a very different model of power from my colleague and mentor, Rabbi Stephen Hart. I worked with Rabbi Hart for six years as Temple Chai's assistant/associate rabbi. Fascinatingly, even though I was a newly minted rabbi, he didn't treat me as any less than him. I was at every board meeting, closed door executive meeting, sitting by his side. I delivered the same number of sermons during the High Holy Days and we split the rabbi's bulletin articles. Furthermore, I witnessed how he worked with lay leaders. He didn't lord over them. Instead, he taught me through personal example of a collaborative model. Our board members met with him and they discussed, brainstormed, and collaborated on solutions to the issues of the day. He was deeply loved and highly influential. Rabbi Hart was a powerfully good rabbi and soon he will be a happily retired grandfather.

Different models of leadership and power are not just relegated to the public sphere but can be present in parenting. Dr. Marv Marshall, long time member of our synagogue, wrote a book called, "Parenting without Stress." In it, he refutes threatening or telling children what to do. He rejects trying to control our children and using reward and punishment as motivators. Instead he advocates helping our children take on responsibility for their actions. Marshall writes, "If parents were to rely less on overpowering and more on empowering from infancy on, there would be significantly less for children to rebel against."² He advocates instead for us to ask reflective questions to help our children take ownership of their decisions and consequences. He writes, "The ultimate goal is that young people act in a responsible way because it pays off for them; it is in their own and others' best interests."³

I find there is a lot of wisdom to Marv's teachings. I remember well how punishments during my teenage years drove me to rebel in a number of ways. On the other hand, when I felt I could make choices for myself, I rose to responsibility. I find myself drawing on these lessons as I parent two great teenagers, Gabriel and Shane.

What I am saying is that there are different kinds of power and especially for us living in a democracy, in an open society, the best use of power is through collaboration, communication, and bringing people together. I believe this is essential not only in healthy synagogue life but is also very applicable to the business realm. When workers feel empowered and appreciated, they are more willing to extend themselves for their business. We all know the ill will that can come from being threatened, exploited, taken advantage, or just bossed around. It doesn't engender a good work ethic and fear can undermine creativity and investment. The best uses of power are ones that foster collaboration and personal investment. This is when a business can truly take off, governance can be at its best, and synagogues can flourish.

The use of power can be expressed in conceptions of physical strength, might of the almighty, synagogue, organizations, politics, and family life. Power can also be exhibited within each and every one of us. There is a powerful saying that comes out of Pirkei Avot, אֵיזְהוּ גְבוּרָה Who is

mighty? How would you answer this? The answer is surprising. **אֵיזוֹהוּ גִבּוֹר**? It's not who can lift the greatest weight. It's not who can control a city or bend people to one's will. It's not who has the largest army or can control their children. It says, **הַכּוֹבֵשׁ אֶת יָצָרוֹ** One who conquers his yetzer. Yetzer is inclination or desire or urges. Have you ever had to reign yourself in? Are there times when you want to yell or cry and you didn't. You don't because you are conquering your yetzer. Yom Kippur is a time for self-reflection and mastery over ourselves. This is why we fast and abstain from pleasure for one day. If we can restrain our hunger and thirst and desires, then maybe we can restrain other parts of ourselves.

During these past difficult months for me, there were many times, when I thought of this teaching. At such moments, I had to **יָצָרוֹ אֶת הַכּוֹבֵשׁ**, conquer, subdue my emotions. I felt anger and frustration but before I reacted, I pondered what would happen if I say what I'm thinking? What will be the outcome if I give voice to my pain? I found myself reflecting, before I spoke what can I possibly accomplish in this situation? What can I gain and what can I lose? This calculation has changed much over time from when I was trying to salvage my marriage and help Paul to realizing that there is nothing I can do or say that will change things. I've used strength that I never thought of before. I restrained myself for the sake of my ability to take care of my kids. I restrained myself for the sake of goodwill. I restrained myself because it was the right thing to do.

I've learned a lot of lessons on strength, power, and vulnerability. I've learned that strength can come when I'm willing to face pain, loss, and disappointment. And I've been taking the time to not only channel my emotions but to understand them, myself, and the life I've created.

One of the things I have also learned is the power of friendship, family, and community. There's a great Chasidic saying about a man who is wandering in the forest. He runs into another man and asks, "Excuse me do you know the way out of here?" The stranger looks at him and says, "I'm lost too but I can tell you the path I just took is not the right one, let's search together." There is an incredible power in the collective wisdom from others. There is so much insight and knowledge that has helped guide me. It is powerful when one realizes that he/she is not alone. This is also one of the great things in getting active in a synagogue. You get to know people and they become family and we rely on another for support in times of need but also celebrate the joys of life as well.

So power can be utilized in many ways, it can be used to bring about change, teach children to take responsibility for themselves, help communities work for the greater good, and can be instrumental in our ability to restrain ourselves.

The prophet Zechariah said these famous words,

לֹא בְחֵיל וְלֹא בְכַח כִּי אִסְבְּרוּחִי “Not by might, not by power, but by spirit alone, may we all live in peace.”⁴ There are limits to might and strength and this is where faith can play a great role in our lives. It is powerful to have hope. It is powerful to believe that life is meaningful and that the future can be better than the past. Faith can take root where it is planted with our people’s ancient teachings, loving relationships, and within community.

May we all find that there is a power within us that can inspire us to be more and better than we were. May we have faith that we are stronger than we realize and as in times of sorrow there can be great joy as well. And may we draw strength from one another here this evening and be empowered to create a better year for ourselves and our families.

Notes:

- 1 <https://www.sunnyskyz.com/funny-jokes.php?jid=22/Strong-Man-Contest>
- 2 Parenting without Stress, Dr. Marvin Marshall pg. 37
- 3 “Pg. 236
- 4 Zechariah 4:6