

Chazak Chazak
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This week's Torah portion seems to mirror our own world – as it so often does. A major civil rights decision is put in practice as the daughters of Zelophehad gain inheritance rights for women. But the match to our lives is more notable at the end. *Matot-Masei* is a double portion of the Torah that concludes the book of Numbers and prepare us to begin Deuteronomy in the coming week. The Ashkenazi Jewish practice is to call out, “*Chazak, Chazak, Vitritchazek*” “From strength to strength may be we be strengthened.”

The origin for this custom is obscure. The double use of “*Chazak*” draws our attention as unusual. Perhaps we can find meaning as Moses passed leadership to Joshua. Twice in Deuteronomy 31, Moses told his successor in front of all Israel, “*Chazak v'emematz*” “Be strong and courageous.” Maybe Joshua needed to hear that blessing twice. Maybe once it was for Joshua and the second time for the Israelites.

Tonight, we reflect on being in that state of *Chazak*. We embrace the past of what has been that created this congregation and its blessings. The memories, the life cycles, the merging of different congregations into a new whole, the leadership, the love of so many that bring us to today. It fills us with *Chazak*.

And we look ahead. To the possibilities, the innovation, the difference that the future brings us. It fills us with *Chazak*.

Neither the past or the future alone is enough. We need both Numbers and Deuteronomy. And when we draw in the strength of both, we are *Nitchazek* – We are strengthened by the reality and opportunity of the present.

We live on the white space between what was and what will be. It can be scary to not know exactly what was ahead. What we left behind may not have always been exactly as we wanted it, but it was familiar, secure. It's in the tension, the world between *Chazak*, that we will grow this synagogue's future. We won't be shackled by the past because we need the strength of the future. We won't be allured by the different simply because it is new because we know where we've been.

As I have the honor of beginning my rabbinic journey together with all of you, let me share a little about myself that is my *Chazak*, my past. I grew up in Brooklyn at a Reform

synagogue where I was mostly active in the Youth Group and Sunday School. Since then I have lived all over the country from Ohio to Texas to New Jersey to Southern California. With stops in Binghamton, Jerusalem, and even a summer in rural Georgia, I appreciate the diversity of people and cultures. But I have always wanted to return to my New York City and the vibrancy it holds.

As a rabbi, I love the word. While I have special fondness for Torah, I relish in the power of the conversation, spoken story, filmed account, modern text, printed page, language of music, even a 140-character tweet all bring.

I strive to be a rabbi in the real world. I enjoy popular culture, especially movies, and the connections it can bring to people of all ages and in leading us back to Torah. *The Godfather*, *Star Wars*, and the latest Pixar film all have something to say about being Jewish. I bring humor wherever I can because the world is too serious a place not to laugh at ourselves and find joy all around us. And I bring with me my adorable toy poodle Quincy, one of my primary assets and biggest supporters.

I always have my eye on the big picture – how does this help us achieve our goals? But I am also a fan of the small details to make each encounter more personal and perfect. I do not possess the gift of learning names quickly nor am I particularly good dancer, but I give my all to anything I try.

I've had the privilege of working with some wonderful congregations, colleagues, and teachers to help me prepare for this moment of transition. I am eager to get to know each of you as individuals, families, and a congregation and help RTFV shape its vision for the future in an ever complex world.

It won't just be up to me. I'll be a catalyst, an encouragement, a risk taker, and a holder of tradition. But like Moses, I can't do it alone.

It won't be just up to you. As individuals, each of you can effect massive influence, but you need a congregation around you to make it thrive.

It will take the combination of all us. The whole Reform Temple of Forest Hills community.

That appears in familiar divisions of how we do things like clergy, staff, and lay leadership. But no matter how you divide up or recognize our community, it will take us all. It'll

take the seniors and empty nesters and new parents and the teenagers and even the toddlers. It'll need the interfaith couples and the singles and the remarried and the widows. It'll take the gay and the straight ally, the interracial families, the special needs, the Jews-by-Choice, the relatives of our Temple families. The past members, the future members, our supporters in the community. It's take those that sing and those that crave meditation. Those that read Hebrew, transliteration, and those that stick to English. Those that believe in God and those with so many questions. Those who are struggling with illness, caring for another, or thankfully have their health right now. Those dealing with loss and those celebrating an upcoming *simcha*. Those who have been here for decades and those who have been here for a week. It'll take everyone and all our ideas, support, vision, commitment, connection, and creativity.

It is said that in a mountain village in Europe many years ago there was a nobleman who spent a great deal of time contemplating what legacy he would leave to the people of his town. He decided to build a synagogue. At last, it was finished, and the townspeople came to inspect. They marveled at the synagogue's magnificence. No one could ever remember so beautiful a synagogue anywhere in the world. The nobleman had created a beautiful spiritual place.

But one of the townspeople was troubled, and spoke up. "Where are the lamps? You forgot the lamps! How will we see?" The nobleman calmly pointed to brackets, which were strategically placed all along the walls throughout the synagogue. He then gave each family a lamp as he explained, "Whenever you come to the synagogue, I want you to bring your lamp and light it. Your community is relying on you for light. Each of your lamps is needed here. Each of your lamps make this synagogue brighter and brighter and brighter."

The brightness shining from the synagogue is tremendous. The light that shines tomorrow will be different and that can be a challenge. But that light will reveal new opportunities and new potential. I have my lamp too. As we together share our lights, our strengths, we will celebrate the past, transform the growing brightness of tomorrow, and build on that *Chazak* to create the blessings of right now.

Chazak Chazak Vitnitchazek. From strength to strength may we be strengthened.