

Be Strong, Be Strong and Let us Strengthen One Another
Rabbi Judith Schindler, Yom Kippur 5775/2015
Temple Beth El, Charlotte, North Carolina

At this moment, I give thanks not only to God, but to each and every one of you.

It was early summer when Mara Purcell approached me as I stepped off the bima from leading a B'nei Mitzvah service. She said to me, "Rabbi Judy, you have grown so much."

It's not the first time I have heard those words. I hear them a lot.

Now here's the thing. I arrived here on August 5, 1998. I was 32 years old and planning an October post High Holiday wedding. I now have a husband and two kids (who are both taller than I am), and I have some gray hair that I cover really well but I was five foot one and three quarter inches then and I am still five foot one and three quarters today (though I do put on heels to add stature and style).

The truth is growing is our goal. Gail Sheehy, the author of the acclaimed book on the stages of life called Passages says, "If we don't change, we don't grow. If we don't grow, we aren't really living."

The story is told of the great Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel who was the sermon advisor to a student at the Conservative Seminary. On a Monday morning, the student delivered a practice sermon before his professor, Rabbi Heschel, who proceeded to share some sharp criticism. The student labored to rewrite his sermon incorporating all Rabbi Heschel's feedback. On the following Thursday, the student delivered his sermon before the entire student body and faculty.

At the community critique afterwards, Abraham Joshua Heschel rose to share further feedback.

"Rabbi, I don't understand," the student remarked. "My sermon captured all of your comments from Monday. How can you now criticize what I have said?"

To which Abraham Joshua Heschel responded, "I have grown since then. I have changed my mind."

Over the past 17 years, I have grown. I had to find my voice. My voice to preach. My voice to lead. My voice to share with all of you and to share with the community.

Over the past 17 years, you have grown. Many of the more than nine hundred B'nei Mitzvah at which I have officiated are now getting married, many confirmation students have babies, our kids have become professionals and are in the work force. Some are soul searching and some are searching for soulmates.

On June 30th, after 18 years of being part of this congregation, I will step off the bima and into the pews. I will move from being a congregational rabbi to being a community rabbi -- a teacher of Judaism and active in social justice.

There are 613 commandments in Judaism, the last of which is to write a Torah. Moses, standing at the edge of the Jordan before his death, tells us in his final words, “And now, write for yourselves this song, and teach it to the Children of Israel. Place it into their mouths, in order that this song will be for God as a witness...” (Deut. 31:19)

As Jews we are not only enjoined to read the Torah, but we are commanded to write a Torah. Writing a Torah takes time – it is written on fine parchment with an elaborate mix of ink, each stroke matters, each word is written with precision, certain letters have crowns glorifying the scroll.

We are each commanded to write a Torah. Now I do not know about you but my handwriting is so illegible that the Torah I would write, could be understood by no one but my cherished administrative assistant Debora Gluick.

The truth is that we all are writing a Torah as we live our lives. Rabbi David Wolpe writes, “Our lives are parchment, our deeds the words. At each moment we determine the style and content of the scroll.”

Our task is to intertwine our own Torah with the Torah of those came before us and of those who stand beside us.

On this eve of Yom Kippur, we reflect on the pages of our personal Torahs. Some pages are painful and others are uplifting but all are sacred. On this eve of Yom Kippur, my last as Senior Rabbi, I reflect on the pages of our shared Torah. The lines and the chapters we have written together.

There were the great pages that capture the ways we have grown. The narratives of hosting regional youth events in which hundreds of youth stayed in our homes and rocked our Temple. There were the stories of our more than a dozen trips to Israel. There were the commandments we embraced to heal our world with impressive social justice programs. The chapters of Beth El speak to dialogue, to learning, to vibrant services, to caring, and to sharing the shining light of Judaism with the community. The relationships we’ve built through Sisterhood, Brotherhood, the Porch and SPICE are the like the sinews of the scroll that binds page to page and person to person. Holding it all together as the *etzei chaim*, the wooden rollers, has been stellar leadership – lay, professional and especially the clergy who are sitting behind me - who have listened with patience, labored with love, and led with passion and vision.

And then there were the pages of our collective Torah filled with pain. Sadly, there were the verses of letting go.

This past June I visited a 68 year old congregant named Jerry Cantor. He and his wife Eileen had moved here nine years ago but had been consumed in opening a restaurant and then in a battle against cancer. “Rabbi, this must be the toughest part of your job.” Jerry said to me.

He was lying in bed and struggling to get adjusted to hospice care. He liked to have control over everything. He said to me, “Rabbi, I have taken so much from Temple, I want to give back.”

Though he died less than two weeks later, he committed to sponsor tomorrow's Break Fast for all of you as a thank you. Acts like this are an inspiration.

Regretfully, in our shared Torah there were the verses of hate.

One morning in August 2001 we drove up to Temple to open the building for a Bar Mitzvah to find anti-Semitic statements spray painted on our building. We were devastated.

Then the community began to reach out. So many calls came in from church members offering to come and paint our building themselves that we built a wall of peace on our front lawn and invited Charlotteans from across the city to come and paint their prayers for peace -- which they did in throngs.

Here's the thing. Each of the hardest moments of our Beth El Torah led to holy moments. The floodwaters of Katrina led to floods of material generosity that enabled us to settle thirteen families. The downpour of harsh economic times unsteadied so many of us. Yet in the midst of the storm, we renovated our magnificent sanctuary so that it could shelter us, inspire us, and allow us to worship together on High Holidays and on all days.

And there are so many pages yet to be written

As Moses stands on the Jordan knowing he is letting go of the leadership, he recalls when the Torah was first given. He says that the text was transmitted as "*aysh dat* – a fiery law."

The Midrash teaches that Torah was given as "black fire on white fire."¹

On the simplest level, black fire reflects the letters and white fire reflects the spaces between the letters. Black fire represents the literal meaning, white fire is the interpretation. The black fire is the limited and fixed, the white fire is the limitless and ever growing.²

Our written Torah holds within it our potential including our potential to learn. As a Rabbi I expect to continue to learn and to grow until my dying breath.

If you asked me how many letters were in the Torah before I wrote this sermon, I would have said there were 600,000 letters. I was taught that the 600,000 letters of Torah reflect the 600,000 souls who originally stood at Sinai and that a Torah is not kosher, it is unfit for reading if the ink on just one letter has fallen from the parchment. Likewise the Jewish people is incomplete when a Jewish soul fails to stand with us.

Yet I learned several weeks ago that there are only 304,800 letters of the Torah.

"So where are all the other letters?" I asked myself.

¹Midrash Tanhuma, Genesis 1

²Based on a teaching by Rabbi Avi Weiss.

The 304,800 letters of Torah are the black letters that we see. They reflect the Jews who are a part of Jewish life. The 295,200 letters reflect the white space and those who are not here but need us -- the unaffiliated, the elderly, the secular, the lost, the lonely. May our Beth El Torah strive to include them, as well.

As a Rabbi I am learning and growing every single day.

A yeshiva student was once speaking to his rabbi, when he admitted, "Someday, I too hope to become a rabbi, aside from my studies is there any other all-important qualification I will need?"

"Yes," replied the rabbi. "You will need a great and creative imagination. You will have to imagine that somebody is paying attention to what you have to say."

I have learned that the Torah of Beth El is not about the words I speak but about the words we write together. It is your remarkable partnership that makes our congregation so exceptional.

The story is told of an older man in Eastern Europe who wanted to leave his shul. I am not sure why. Perhaps the chazzan, the cantor, changed the tunes. Perhaps the Rabbi took a stand on an issue with which the man disagreed. Perhaps times were changing in a way that left him feeling alienated. Or perhaps the shul was no longer meeting his needs.

His rabbi decided to visit him at his home and found the man at home sitting before a blazing fire. The rabbi sat beside him. After some minutes, the Rabbi took the poker, and carefully moved a brightly burning ember and placed it to the side of the hearth. The lone ember's flame flickered and faded. The rabbi then pushed the cold, dead ember back in the middle of the fire and it began to glow once more with light and warmth.

The man immediately understood the rabbi's silent sermon (which are the best kind of sermons of all). We are each Jewish embers who need the flames of community to keep our Jewish souls strong. We need Jewish community and Jewish community needs us.

Our Torah teaches that God dwells where we dwell together. Our Torah teaches that blessings and curses are in our hands. We create blessings by being blessings to those around us. Our Torah teaches that God needs humanity. Just as God needed the prophets to speak for justice, God's needs us to bring to the world the Godly values of justice, compassion and peace.

In nine months, we will open a new chapter of our Beth El Torah. When we turn from one book of the Torah to the next we say the words "*Chazak, chazak v'nitchazek*, be strong, be strong and let us strengthen one another."

Chazak means be strong, be resolute, have courage.

"*Chazak* – be strong," I say to myself.

I must be strong as my inner voice tells me it is time to move forward. This chapter we have written together has been the most significant chapter of my life.

I have grown in my time here. In gratitude for each one of you -- for your love, for your kindness, for your relationships that have enriched my life, and for your acceptance of who I am... flaws and all.

You have helped me grow. You taught me how to die with grace, how to build with faith, and at times how to rebuild when much has been lost.

In the musical *Wicked*, Glinda says words that have been running through my mind as I wrote this sermon:

*I've heard it said that people come into our lives for a reason
bringing something we must learn
And we are led to those who help us most,
to grow if we let them and we help them in return
Well, I don't know if I believe that's true
but I know I'm who I am today because I knew you...
Like a comet pulled from orbit as it passes the sun
Like a stream that meets a boulder halfway through the wood
Who can say if I've been changed for the better?
But because I knew you
I have been changed for good*

“*Chazak* – Be strong,” I say to you.

Be strong and resolute. Be creative. Be energetic. Be giving and be kind. Be committed to continuing to create the best congregation in the country.

“*V'nitchazek* – and let us strength one another.”

Making the decision to leave Beth El was so painful because I carry your stories as sacred possessions. I know your tragedies and your trials, your healing and your hopes, your successes and your great sources of pride. Though I carry your stories and you carry mine, new stories will be shared. I am unwavering in my faith that as a congregational family we will engage a great Senior Rabbi -- a teacher who will inspire us, a leader whose voice will echo in the community, a person who has an amazing Torah to teach and to write in partnership with us.

“*V'nitchazek*... let us strengthen one another.”

For we still need to grow as individuals and as a congregation. You will grow as you face the challenges of job or budget insecurity, of illnesses, of raising children, of overwhelming demands placed upon you. You will grow from your celebrations as you lift each other on chairs for the hora and bless each other at milestones on the bima. You will grow when you realize who you are and struggle to become the individuals and congregation you want to be. You will grow

when you realize that the letters of your lives are interconnected with those of others and made more beautiful as a result.

The story is told of a father who traveled with his son for miles. Each time they reached an obstacle such as a river or mountain, the father lifted his son on his shoulders and carried him through the difficult terrain. Finally they came to their destination – a walled castle. But the gate of the castle was closed, and there were only narrow windows on the sides of the wall. The father said to his son: “My son, up until now I have carried you. Now the only way we can reach our destination is if you will climb through the windows and open the gate for me from within.”

So it is, said the Maggid, with parents and children and God. Parents take care of their children, feed and clothe them, and see them through all sorts of obstacles. Yet parents who have so many strengths, often find the gate to God closed. But children have a special spiritual magic. They can climb to places their parents and teachers cannot reach. Children can fling open the gates of heaven from within so that they and their parents or teachers can reach God together.

I have been fulfilled in the role of Sr. Rabbi. I have had the joy and the pleasure of dreaming with you about the gates that could be opened for this congregation and working to make those dreams a reality. But as of July 1st, it will be your job to carry this congregation forward with new leadership and continue to open those gates:

- The gates of inclusion... so all will know that no matter what their race or background, they are welcome inside these walls.
- The gate of forgiveness... for we are all flawed human beings and growing.
- The gates of justice... for the inequities of our world are great.
- The gates of learning... so that our children can appreciate the Torah that we and our ancestors have given them.
- The gates of generosity and the gates of love... for we have so much to share.

Chazak, chazak v'nitchazek.

Chazak - may you be strong and continue to always build a stellar congregation that shines a light upon our community, our movement and world.

Chazak - may I be strong as I let go of the leadership and allow someone else to take the helm of this congregation I love so deeply as I start a new chapter of my Rabbinic career.

V'nitchazek – and may we always strengthen one another.

May the Torah we have written and the Torah we will continue to write fill our lives and our world with blessings, with wholeness and with peace. Amen.