

I'm going to ask you to help me start this sermon, with these three words: *Chazak, Chazak V'nitchazek*. Cantor Shochet is going to show us how these words are chanted. Cantor, could you show us how it goes? *Chazak, Chazak V'nitchazek*. Now, all together: *Chazak, Chazak V'nitchazek*. Thank you. Great. Now, would you all do this again, and, very aggressively interrupt me as I try to start my sermon? Ready? One, two three. "I wanted to speak with you today about..." (*Chazak, Chazak V'nitchazek*)

Perfect. I've asked Cantor Shochet to lead you, from his seat, in chanting those words one more time, as loud as you can muster, in a minute.

I have had the honor to stand with hundreds of young people on the bema of this synagogue as they become B'nai Mitzvah. Parents, aunts and uncles stand proudly around the Torah scroll. The kid, who's been chanting Torah in their sleep for months, has become best friends with their tutor, moving the yad in circles and squiggles to remember the tunes, finally gets their time to shine. We say to them *Yashar Koach*. Literally it means, "straight power," but as a generation Xer, I prefer the loose translation, "May the Force Be With You." But five times a year, a different, and more exciting response happens. Right after this young person finishes the last words of the portion, before the honored guest can begin the blessing after the reading, the entire congregation interrupts, with the words...*Chazak, Chazak V'nitchazek*.

Exactly. Maybe some of you have been here for this on one of those five times a year and seen the confused look on the face of that lucky, or unlucky B'nai Mitzvah. It always throws them off, no matter how many times we've warned them. Does anyone know what the occasion is that brings us to do this every ten weeks? That's right. We do this when we finish one of the five books of the Torah.

*Chazak, Chazak V'nitchazek* means, "Be strong, be strong, and we will be strengthened." Yoab, King David's great and charismatic military commander, uses these words give courage to the troops, when they are going off to battle. Jews, in turn, have echoed these words for over a thousand years, to punctuate these breaking points in our people's story. A thousand years is only fifty generations. Think about that: imagine 50 people, each standing behind their child. It's like a long line at Target. In the front of the line are those

Jews who first began chanting these words in, say, Cordoba in the year 1,025, during the Golden Age of Jewish life in Spain, and in the back of the line here we are, joining in. “Be strong, be strong, and we will be strengthened.”

As we gather on Rosh Hashanah, to pray, engage in *Teshuvah* – and yes, hear a reading from the Torah – each of us has our own reason we are looking for strength. Strength to be honest with ourselves and our loved ones, which is never as easy as we think it is. Resilience to overcome challenges we are encountering in our health, our jobs, our relationships, perhaps the loss of a loved one. Fortitude to face the overarching events of our day, from the war in Israel and Gaza, to the rise of animosity towards Jews, which looms as a threat and a constant presence in our minds, to vast changes in the federal government that are affecting all of us, and some among us in very direct and practical ways. When I hear, *Chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek*, I feel an ancient power coming through in those words, a power of connection, encouragement, and inspiration. I hear all of those voices mixed in with ours. from Cordoba to Sinai. Our ancestors are sending us a message: we have what we need to confront the challenges of our lives. It is in the legends written on the Torah scroll. It can be found in the many stories of our people throughout our history. It lives in the narratives of our own families.

My grandmother was Greta Steigerwald Stuehler. As a kid, I used to practice my German accent and call her *Gretel*. She was born in Frankfurt in 1915. She lived with her parents, two older sisters and her grandfather. She would join her grandfather every Saturday to light the braided candle and say the Havdalah blessings to end Shabbat.

Her father owned a successful business making fashion buttons for women’s clothing. When Greta was 17, though, her father began to see the changes happening in Germany, more and more opportunities being closed off to Jews. He said to her, “It doesn’t look like you are going to be able to go to college. Come and work for me.” Greta dropped out of high school and worked at her father’s business for four years. She later appreciated this for teaching her responsibility. One day, he called her into his office and pointed out the window. A group of Nazi youth had heard about a handful of Jewish businessmen having a meeting. They were now pointing their bayonets, marching these men down the street with their hands behind their heads.

In that moment, in 1936, Greta decided someone in her family needed to learn English and find a way for them all to leave. She found out she could go to London and work as a maid for a Jewish family. Her boyfriend, my grandfather Paul, didn't like the idea. She'd never traveled anywhere by herself. Her spoken English was nonexistent. Her parents begged her not to go. "What do you know of housework," they asked? "You grew up with a maid." And she said, "I will learn." Greta was exceedingly nervous, but she didn't let it show. She went and spent two years in London. It was hard, and the work was unpleasant. But the family was kind, she found other German young people, and she became fluent in English.

When Greta returned to Germany, it was 1938. Paul had moved to San Francisco and sent an affidavit for her to follow him. They got married in a rabbi's living room a week after she arrived off the boat. It was not the wedding she had imagined, and she cried through the ceremony because her parents were not present. But she kept moving forward. In early 1941, months before Jews were no longer allowed to leave Germany, they were finally able to arrange tickets for her parents, with help from Greta's two sisters, who had moved to New York with their husbands. They had to borrow money, \$50 from Greta's boss, and \$60 from my grandfather's. Her whole family had made it to America.

All of us have family members who came to America during those years, or in the early 1900's or at another time. We all have stories of grandparents who left with nothing and made lives for themselves and their children. Those of us *without* Jewish parents have these stories, too. What would our grandparents say to us to help us today? *Chazak!* We have seen this resilience alive in our community, in our federal workers who have been disrespected and pushed out of agencies where they have served with dedication. We see all over this community the ability to make sacrifices and take risks for our families, to work hard even when we thought things would be easier, to deal with illness, to help a loved one with the struggles they are going through, to step up and be a supportive sacred community. This is a hard and threatening time. But we don't have to feel it in isolation. Our families and our stories are with us.

We should tell our children all of the family stories we can, even if they don't want to hear them! Not long ago, psychologists at Emory University found that the more children know about their family histories, the higher their self-esteem, and the more control they feel they have over their lives. The researchers developed a Do You Know Scale from asking the children they studied questions about their families' lives. How well the children did on this scale was the best way to predict their emotional well-being. They also concluded that the most helpful kind of story in building resilience was what they called an oscillating narrative: we've had good times, and we've had many struggles, but we stick together. Our family histories, including our struggles and the ways we have overcome them, are a part of what holds us up throughout our lives. We are standing on the shoulders of our ancestors.

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Amir Tibon lived on Kibbutz Nahal Oz, near the Gaza border. On the morning of October 7, Amir and his wife, Miri, woke up to the whistling of a mortar. To them, this was only a mild surprise. Because they lived so close to Gaza, they were used to rushing within seven seconds to the safe room, which was also the bedroom of their two- and three-year-old daughters, Carmel and Galia. But soon, they heard gunfire and then shouting, and the shock set in that their kibbutz was under attack. Amir texted his father, a retired general, and both of his parents jumped in their car and left Tel Aviv for the Gaza envelope. Miri and Amir spent eight hours hiding in the safe room, miraculously keeping the girls quiet. Their phones eventually died, and their only source of light was Carmel's glow-in-the-dark pacifier. They had argued about buying this, but Miri insisted, so Carmel could find it every time it fell out of her mouth. Now it was coming in handy.

Meanwhile, Amir's parents were headed for the kibbutz. They passed nightmarish scenes on the way. They stopped to drive a panicked civilian couple, who had been at the Nova Festival, to safety. Then, they paused again and separated so Amir's mother could drive a severely wounded soldier to the hospital, and his father continued without a car. He took a weapon from a fallen soldier and joined in the fighting. He ran into another retired general he knew and enlisted his help in getting to Nahal Oz. Eventually, he was able to personally take part in rescuing his family and be the one to bang on the wall

and yell to them that the coast was clear. Galia finally sensed that it was ok for her to speak. “*Saba kan,*” Galia said. Grandpa is here,” They were safe.

It is a story of incredible heroism, of a community confronting a crisis together, even of putting off saving your family’s lives to save the lives of others. But the story then continues in the actions of Amir Tibon after having been rescued. Amir is a journalist by profession. He went on to write a book. Imagine having that kind of focus and drive in the midst of a trauma like this. Amir’s book, *The Gates of Gaza*, is aimed at learning lessons from the October 7 attack, examining why the failures of defense and rescue happened. He mourns the days of peacebuilding and cross-border cooperation that existed in communities like Nahal Oz, like helping Gazans receive medical care. Most important, in his book and his many public appearances, Amir seeks to help us understand the underlying missteps by the leadership of both sides of the conflict that brought it to this point. He is able to express his proud Zionism and at the same time acknowledge the suffering of the Palestinians in Gaza and urge a different, more compassionate response.

Amir is telling his story, his truth, of tragedy & triumph and struggle & strength, his oscillating narrative that we and so many other need to hear. Amir and Miri are rebuilding their house on the kibbutz so they can return to live there. Their heroism and that of so many others shows us that the resilience of Israelis is alive and well. This is part of the story of October 7 and its aftermath. And, we must learn the story of the other side as well. Our ability to do this will be essential in helping determine the future of Israel. It will not be easy. But our families and our stories are with us. *Chazak.*

The year was 70 CE, and Jerusalem was under siege by the Romans. Jewish zealots controlled the city, and they would never surrender. They would kill anyone who tried to offer a compromise. This was the peak moment of the Jewish people’s despair, and it is the setting of the legendary story, written in the Talmud, of Rabbi Yohanan Ben Zakai. Yohanan could not sit and watch as his people lost everything. He gathered with his students and his colleagues and made a plan. He had himself smuggled past the Jewish guards and out of the city. Does anyone know how he was smuggled out? Yes, in a coffin. Then, he approached the Roman governor, who was about to become the emperor. The governor was impressed by Yohanan’s wisdom, and he granted him a

request. Yohanan did not ask for the Temple to be spared—he knew that was impossible—but instead, he asked: “Give me Yavneh and its sages.”

This is a story of the resilience that comes from being open to new visions for the future. Yavneh is a small town that still exists today, about 10 miles south of Tel Aviv. There, Yohanan created a new center of Jewish learning that became the basis for the reimagined Judaism that is what we see today. Instead of sacrifice, we began to focus on prayer and study. Torah and synagogues took the place of the altar and the Temple in Jerusalem. It is because of Yavneh that we have prayers like Shalom Rav and Oseh Shalom. Yavneh opened the door to the questioning and debate that makes Judaism so exciting, the ethical teachings of Maimonides, the spiritual pursuits of Jewish mysticism. What if we had not had Yohanan?

Many times, we Jews have predicted of the end of Judaism. Thirty years ago, the problem was interfaith marriage. Everyone agreed it would bring total assimilation, that all of these children would leave in one generation. Our congregation is the best proof that that was completely wrong. The Reform movement was at the forefront of recognizing the new reality of interfaith marriage and, also, seeing that our future depended on a proactive and welcoming approach. The process of completely embracing interfaith couples and families and performing their weddings took decades, and it could have happened faster. But, thankfully, we learned how to embrace all our families and draw them closer to Judaism and to community. Now, we see that many of our most committed, passionate and active members are not Jewish! Some eventually convert, and others do not but are still part of our community. They volunteer, lead, and raise Jewish children. Because the Reform movement was like Yohanan, the story of interfaith families today is a story of success.

We are now, again, in a transitional phase of Jewish life and identity. Jews coming of age now are different, and the Jewish community has been working to open up in many ways, embracing diversity of all kinds. Young Jews want engagement with Jewish ideas, practices that might have been cast aside, and social justice work. They want to be a new generation in the Jewish story.

Some of that newness will not be easy, and being like Yohanan will also require an even more nuanced approach to Israel than we have sought to have

till this point. I feel more strongly than ever that we must stay engaged with Israel, and that is why Rabbis Schwartzman, Tasman and I are putting together a trip there in March. I said two years ago that as Jews, we are part of this conversation on Israel whether we like it or not, and that includes a responsibility. We should come to that conversation from a place of knowledge and relationship with Israel and Israelis, and only by staying engaged can we help Israel fulfill its true vision. But every Jew, young and not-so-young, must be allowed to come to a relationship with Israel in their own time, and on their own terms. For some, this will mean not at all. Like Yohanan, we don't know what the next generation will look like. Like my grandmother's parents, we must trust that they know what they are doing, or, that they will learn, and then lead the way. Some of them have a deep love for Israel. Some do not. Some are taking on the work of defending Israel's right to exist, and some of those same Jews are just as passionate about standing with the Israelis who are protesting in the streets to end the war. We would do best to embrace all our young people, encourage them, and help them engage, speak out, and count themselves as part of the Jewish people. It is the Jewish way. *Chazak*.

We are standing on the shoulders of our ancestors. Yohanan, Amir, and all of our grandparents are speaking to us. They are showing us the value of knowing the Jewish story and our personal story. This is true for all of us. If you're here in this sanctuary, you're part of us.

The high holy days are an invitation to write a new chapter. How can we draw strength from our families, our community and our people? This Rosh Hashanah, let's stretch our reach as widely as we can. Let's reach back, hearing our ancestors chanting, "Be strong, be strong, and we will be strengthened." Let's reach forward, 50 generations into the future and more. Let's remember, our families and our stories are with us. They carry us and give us strength, as we move forward, together. *Chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek*.