

Be Strong: Thoughts for Parashat Pekudei

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Pekudei

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Many years ago, a young lady came to my office to discuss the possibility of her conversion to Judaism. She was raised in Saudi Arabia to American parents in the American military. She grew up hating Israel and hating Jews—although she had never met either an Israeli or a Jew.

When she reached college age, she came to the United States to study here. She met Jewish students and found that they were nice people, not at all like the stereotypical Jews she had learned to hate as a child. She began to study Judaism. She learned about Jewish history and about modern Israel. She eventually met, and fell in love with, an Israeli man.

In due course, she converted to Judaism, married the Israeli, established a religiously traditional household, and had children who attended Jewish day schools when they came of age.

We discussed the remarkable transformation of her life...from a hater of Jews and Israel, to an actively religious Jew, married to an Israeli Jew. In one of our conversations, she mused: “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if all haters could suddenly find themselves in the shoes of the ones they hate? If only people really understood the hated victims by actually living as one of them!”

She came to this insight through her personal experiences. She overcame blind hatred by literally becoming one of those she had previously despised. She wished that all haters would at least try to see their victims as fellow human

beings rather than as unhuman stereotypes. If only people could replace their hatred with empathy!

While this is an important insight, it obviously eludes many people. Our societies are riddled with racism, anti-Semitism, anti-nationality x or anti-ethnicity y. It seems that many people prefer to hate rather than to empathize. They somehow imagine that they are stronger if they tear others down. In one of his essays, Umberto Eco suggests that human beings need enemies! It is through their enemies that they solidify their own identities.

Yet, if we truly want to be strong individuals, we need to define ourselves by our own values—not by who we hate or who we see as our enemies. A person with inner strength is a person who can empathize with others, can overcome hatred, and can find fellowship even with those of different religion, race or nationality. Hatred is a sign of weakness, a defect in our own souls.

This week's Parasha brings us to the end of the book of Exodus. It is customary in some congregations for congregants to call out at the conclusion of the Torah reading: "Hazak ve-nit-hazak, hizku ve-ya-ametz levavhem kol ha-myahalim la-do-nai." Be strong, and let us strengthen ourselves; be strong and let your heart have courage, all you who hope in the Lord. This is a way of celebrating the completion of a book of the Torah, and encouraging us to continue in the path of Torah study so we may complete other books as well.

I think that a phrase from the above-quoted text can be interpreted as follows: hizku--strengthen yourselves, be resolute; ve- ye-ametz levavhem--and God will give courage to your hearts. First, you need to strengthen yourselves, develop the power of empathy and love. Then, God will give you the added fortitude to fulfill your goals. If we strengthen ourselves, we may trust that the Almighty will give us added strength.

Be strong, unafraid, empathetic; if we hone these values within ourselves and our families, we may be hopeful that the Almighty will grant us the courage to succeed in our efforts.