

**My Fight is Needed Elsewhere:**  
How to Save Up for When it Matters Most  
*Rosh HaShanah 5786*  
*Rabbi D'ror Chankin-Gould*

This summer, like millions of others, I took my boys to see the latest Superman movie. I didn't hesitate. It looked like good, clean, fun. The kids had a good time. The effects were exciting. The plot was a bit corny, the emphasis on Superman's dog was a little silly, but at the end of the day we all enjoyed it. I didn't think much about it, to be honest.

And then, only afterwards, did I come to realize that the movie was controversial. There are countless articles on the net panning the new Superman movie and its director. It turns out that the bottom line is that the version portrayed just didn't appear strong enough for many Americans. This Superman was derided as being too *kind*...he thought about the feelings of others before acting. This Superman was criticized as being too *thoughtful*... he hesitated rather than just jumping into a fight. Folks longed for a *classic* hero, one who would shoot first and ask questions later. Instead, this deliberative, cautious, empathic, calculated, and even patient Superman, struck many an American movie goer as simply “weak.”

Why is that? We live in a trigger-happy culture which defines strength in a classic western notion of intervening with decisive action at all times and in all places. In a Western context, even Superman isn't strong enough.

This is not a recent phenomenon. One of our country's founders, Benjamin Franklin, is famously quoted as having said "There will be plenty of time to sleep when you're dead."

With that rubric for strength, anyone who stops and breathes, anyone who calculates when and if to intervene, anyone who prioritizes some battles over others, anyone who steps back from a fight in order to recharge or refuel ... is, just like the new Superman, considered weak.

And if Superman is too weak, what does that say about the rest of us?

No wonder every person I talk to tells me how tired they are. This year in particular, each of us is pulled in so many directions. The number of issues which are pressing and distressing is simply overwhelming. Everywhere we turn: family, work, American democracy, the situation in Israel, it feels as if the world is on fire. It turns out, we mere mortals, need to sleep long before we're dead. Does that mean we're weak?

This is a classic *western* notion of strength. But today, on Rosh HaShanah, we might ask ourselves, what is a *Jewish* notion of strength?

The truth is that Judaism provides a counter-cultural vision of strength which is grounded in patience, discernment, and strategy. Our fight is certainly needed. But we are not superheroes nor classic Western stars, we are human.

The choice of when *not* to fight, because it is either a waste of energy, ineffective, or unrealistically ambitious, is just as important as the choice of when *to* fight.

The stories our wise ancestors chose to highlight on Rosh HaShanah are designed to guide us on precisely this enduring conundrum.

Today we read the story of Hannah. The Haftarah for the first day of Rosh HaShanah is all about this brave fighter, this heroic woman, who was misunderstood. When Hannah was praying for a child, she moved her lips but no sound emerged. The powers that be, the priest Eli, maligned her. He believed her to be drunk. Hannah fought back. Hannah cleared her name. Hannah declared,

לֹא אֵדָנִי

*“No sir! I am a very unhappy woman. I have drunk **no** wine or other strong drink, but I **have** been pouring out my heart to GOD.*

אֶל-תִּתֵּן אֶת-אַמְתְּךָ לִפְנֵי בַת-בְּלִיעַל

*Don't you dare shame me.*

*I have only been speaking all this time out of my great anguish and distress.”*

That's the fight Hannah chooses. She fights for her integrity. She fights for her name. She fights for her child.

But that doesn't mean she *always* fights...

If we back up a few verses, we will find that Hannah is actually more discerning. For years, Hannah has been tortured and ridiculed by her husband's other wife, Peninah.

In the words of the Haftarah:

וְכַעֲסָתָהּ צָרָתָהּ גַּם-כָּעַס בְּעָבוּר הָרַעְמָה כִּי-סָגַר יְהוָה בְּעַד רַחֲמָהּ :

*Moreover, her enemy, to make Hannah miserable, would taunt her that God had closed her womb."*

And all that time, how did Hannah react? She didn't retort. She didn't respond. She didn't waste her breath. She didn't dignify Peninah's nastiness with a come-back.

Hannah knew that her fight was needed elsewhere. She saved her strength for when it mattered most. If Hannah had wasted her breath with Peninah, what would she have had left for Eli?

Tomorrow's Torah portion is a cautionary tale about the opposite side of the same coin. We encounter Abraham being asked by God to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. We are stunned by his silence. Abraham doesn't protest. Abraham doesn't reply. Abraham simply acquiesces.

Why? Perhaps because he has nothing left.

Only a chapter ago, we saw a different Abraham. God was ready to destroy the cities of Sodom & Gomorrah. These cities, we are told, were filled with rapists and murderers. Every citizen either participated in or enabled this behavior.

And yet, Abraham fought for them. Abraham argued with God. What if there are 50 good people? What if there are 45? 30? 20? What if there are 10?!

While that fight might seem heroic, it was also fruitless. In the end, there were not *even* 10 upstanding human beings.

And once Abraham had finished fighting his inevitably losing battle with God, he was depleted. His fire was extinguished.

When the time to fight for his son arrived, a protest which God *certainly* would have heard since we know that God ultimately stopped the slaughter... Abraham had wasted his energy, and had no strength remaining.

Hannah's choice not to fight Peninah, was not *weakness*, it was a Jewish definition of *strength*.

Abraham's depleted energy, his attitude of “I'll sleep when I'm dead” was *not* effective. If only he had been more discerning, he might have saved his fight for what mattered most: his son.

On Rosh HaShanah, our rabbis want us to learn from their examples. We are meant to discern when, if, and how to fight.

This year, I spoke with a friend whose work environment is unpleasant... to say the least. He is ignored, left out of office parties, the recipient of gossip, and is assigned everyone else's odd jobs. It's maddening. And also... he's exhausted. Pushing back isn't changing anything. And when he uses up all his energy at work, fighting against stupid annoyances, he has nothing left. The battle he needs to fight, the real priority, is his wife's cancer. The question for him has been, can I let the papercuts at work go, in order to gear up for where I'm really needed? To march by her side through the endless appointments, side effects, and nightmares? He wasn't weak to avoid the work battles, he was strong.



In a similar vein, a cousin of mine shared that her volunteer work has become overwhelming. She spends countless hours doing and redoing the same pointless tasks. She feels like she's making no headway. As hard as she's tried to shift the system, the timing is all wrong. There's a new CEO who's just getting her feet wet. Even if the necessary changes could be made, it just can't happen *yet*. So my cousin quit. Volunteer work is meant to fill your tank. Now that she's stepped back, she's instead spending time and engaging in her work, lab research, with renewed vigor. She wasn't weak to step back, she was strong.

I reconnected recently with a former colleague from decades ago. He shared about his fraught relationship with his brother. For years he tried to fix his brother's career woes and convince him to admit fault for his own misdeeds. It didn't work. Eventually he concluded that his brother did need the intervention, but he couldn't receive it from a family member. So... he decided to recalibrate. He has created room for others to step in instead. Now, this colleague told me, for the first time in years, he has the energy to organize to register local voters. He's finally fighting a battle which is realistic and sustainable. This is not weakness, but strength.

Strength requires wisdom. And words... may require silence.

In the Jerusalem Talmud, there is a poignant teaching about the Torah itself. The text reads:

*Rebbi Phineas taught in the name of Rebbi Simeon ben Laqish: The Torah which the Holy One gave to Moses, was white fire engraved in black fire.*

אֵשׁ לְבָנָה חֲרוּתָהּ בְּאֵשׁ שְׁחֹרָה .

What does that mean? Rav Kook, the first Ashkenazi chief Rabbi of Israel, explained:

*“When we think about a Torah scroll, we usually only consider the letters themselves, written in black ink. Yet, the Talmud (Menachot 29a) rules that every letter in a Torah scroll must be completely surrounded by parchment....In other words, the white parchment around the letters is an integral part of the Torah; without it, the Torah scroll is disqualified.*

*...The white space is a higher form of Torah. It is analogous to the white fire of Sinai .”*

The Jewish tradition teaches us that true strength lies in the proper balance. The ink, the black fire - action - is sacred. The space, the white fire - contemplation - is just as sacred.

If we only choose black fire, constant reactivity, noise and rapid response, we will run out of energy. We will also run out of audiences. If we scream constantly, our voices become background noise. We become ineffective. We become irrelevant. We become so depleted that we are rendered useless.

On the other hand, if we choose only white fire, restraint and silence, handwringing and hesitation, we will fail to make an impact. We will fail to speak out. If we are too silent, our inaction can be deadly.

The Jewish question of strength is about honoring both the white AND the black fire. The cheshbon hanefesh question of Rosh HaShanah, the soul-searching inventory of this new year, is not *whether* to fight, it is *how* to choose our battles.

A tried but true method for this discernment is a series of three questions, that I myself ask frequently:

1. Is this message needed?
2. Is now the time?
3. Am I the person?

The first question is about content and priorities. Is this message needed? Is this fight really necessary? Is this a battle worth waging?

My friend came to realize that his priorities needed to be clarified. He learned to say my fight is needed elsewhere. His obnoxious colleagues could be ignored. His wife needed him.

The prophet Micah distills our Jewish priorities succinctly.

He says,

הַגִּיד לָךְ אָדָם מִה־טוֹב וּמִה־יָהוָה דּוֹרֵשׁ מִמֶּךָ כִּי אִם־עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט וְאַהֲבַת חֶסֶד וְהִצַּנֵּעַ לֵכָת “  
 {עִם־אֱלֹהֶיךָ: ס}

You have been told, O mortal, what is good,

And what GOD requires of you:

Only to do justice

And to love kindness,

And to walk modestly with your God.

As we choose between the black fire and the white fire, the first question is, “Is this message needed?” Is this about justice? Is this about kindness? Is this about humility or faith or core values? If so, it’s time to suit up. If not, maybe we should take a breath first, and reassess.

The second question is about strategy. Is now the time? Are we acting too quickly or too slowly? Is there enough of a coalition? Are the people ready to hear this? Is today a day when I have the strength or clarity which is required?

My cousin discerned that her volunteer organization wasn't ready for the change work they needed to do. Even though the message was important, the timing was all wrong.

Jewish prayer is predicated on the question of choosing the right timing. We might think that for heartfelt prayer, like for a passionate cause, timing is irrelevant. But not so.

On weekdays, we pray for healing, strength, victory in battle, and gainful employment. On Shabbat, we don't. On Shabbat, a day of rest, there are no requests, only gratitude. As of today, we pray for clear skies. In a few weeks, after Sukkot, and only after... we will pray for rain. Why? Number one - we don't want it to rain in our Sukkahs. Number two - it's not realistic. When you are a desert people, you don't pray for rain in the summer.

Timing is everything. Jewish prayer teaches us patience and discipline: if the timing isn't right, it would be better to hold back for a bit.

The third question is about humility. Am I the person? Will this essential and timely message be heard best from my voice? Do I have the skills or the energy or the reputation to serve the cause? If not, is there someone else's voice I could amplify instead?

My colleague knew his brother needed help. The message was right. He knew the help was urgent. Timing was of the essence. And, he realized, as a family member... he was simply the wrong messenger.

The greatest leader of the Jewish people was Moses. And what was he known for? His humility. The Torah says of Moses, in Numbers 12:3

וְהָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה עֲנֹו מְאֹד מִכָּל־הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר עַל־פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה: {ס}

*Now Moses himself was very humble, more so than any other human being on earth.*

And where do we see the proof of Moses' humility? Moses knows that God's message of freedom needs to be delivered - the priority is clear. Moses knows that the timing for liberation from Egyptian bondage is ripe - God has chosen the date. What Moses wonders, with admirable humility, is whether *he* is the right spokesperson.

Exodus, chapter 4, verse 10:

לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים אָנֹכִי .... כִּי כְבֹד־פֶּה וְכִבְדּוֹ לְשׁוֹן אָנֹכִי:

*But Moses said to God, "Please, I have never been a man of words... I am slow of speech and slow of tongue."*

Is Moses the right person? Yes and no.

Yes - Moses is a child of the palace, his voice will be heard. Moses is Pharaoh's family - he will be effective. Moses is the leader God has chosen - he will not be alone.



But also.... Moses's humility is well placed. The message is more important than the messenger. God brings in reinforcements. Aaron is a more effective communicator, he will be part of the team that will get the message out:

*“There is your brother Aaron the Levite. He speaks readily. .... I will be with you and with him as you speak, and tell both of you what to do - and he shall speak for you to the people.”*

When we show true strength, it is about setting ego aside. Who will be the best messenger for this idea? How can I help to make sure *that* person, whether or not it is me, will be heard?

We cannot fight every battle. Strength lies in the choosing, in the balance. And so *Jewish* strength asks us to think: 1. Is this the message? 2. Is now the time? 3. Am I the person?

Rosh HaShanah is a sacred opportunity to reject empty virtue signaling and to instead clarify if, when, and how to act.

This Rosh HaShanah, and most especially in these exceptionally fraught times, may we embrace the Black Fire AND the White Fire within us. May we be as strong as Hannah, saving our fight for when it is needed most. May we be as wise as the Prophet Micah, moving with speed and clarity on true priorities. May we be as discerning as our prayer book, patiently choosing the *right* time to deliver the words or actions which are needed. May we be as humble as Moses, prioritizing the message over the messenger, stepping up or stepping back not guided by the bluster of ego, but by the strength of discernment.

Let us ask ourselves:

- When do I need to fight when I am currently sitting on the sidelines?
- When do I need to let go and focus elsewhere?

Our fight is needed... but we simply can't march into every arena. If we're going to be *Jewishly* strong, we had better choose our battles wisely.

Many of us know that Superman is a hero dreamt up by Jews and representing Jewish values and Jewish dreams. Perhaps a Superman who is kind and thoughtful, patient and strategic... is precisely the model of *Jewish* strength, which Rosh HaShanah invites us to dream of.

Shanah Tovah.