

“Said Dr. Dorian...‘I don’t understand how a spider learned to spin a web in the first place. When the words appeared, everyone said they were a miracle. But nobody pointed out that the web itself is a miracle.’

‘What’s miraculous about a spider’s web?’ said Mrs. Arable. ‘I don’t see why you say a web is a miracle—it’s just a web.’

‘Ever try to spin one?’ asked Dr. Dorian.”

Charlotte’s Web, E.B. White

Dr. Dorian, the rural physician in the classic children’s book *Charlotte’s Web* by E.B. White, got it right. A spider’s web truly is miraculous, made up of silk that is twenty times thinner than a single strand of hair but is elastic and resilient enough to withstand wind and rain. Pound for pound, spider silk is much stronger than many types of steel. But more wondrous perhaps than the chemical and engineering feat of a spider’s web or the fact that Charlotte, the spider, can spin words into her web, is the story of Charlotte and Wilbur the pig’s unlikely friendship.

And the web is not just the tool by which Charlotte saves Wilbur's life in the story, the web is a symbol of the resilience, of hope, and of the connection that two beings can weave together while navigating the uncertainty of life.

Tonight, and throughout Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we will sing some of the words of Psalm 27. This psalm is traditionally read through the month of Elul and the High Holidays. As a journey through uncertainty and faith, it is a fitting companion to this season of reviewing ourselves as we prepare for a year of uncertainty ahead. The chorus of our theme song comes from the last line of Psalm 27, which in the original psalm reads:

קִוֵּה, אֶל-יְהוָה חֲזִק וַיֵּאֲמַץ לִבִּי וְקִוֵּה אֶל-יְהוָה

Look to Adonai; Strengthen and bolster your heart and look to

Adonai! (*Psalms 27:14*)

I want to talk first about strengthening our hearts. It sounds like simple advice, וַיִּחְזַק לִבּוֹ, but there is a famous person in our tradition who strengthened his heart so much that it hardened.

That person is Pharoah.

Now lest you worry that your rabbi has gotten confused about what holiday it is, not to worry, I know. Pesach is in six months.

Tonight is Rosh Hashanah.

But over and over again in the Exodus narrative, we are told *vayehezek lev Paroah*, that Pharoah strengthened his heart. Even before the plagues begin, we are told:

וַיִּחְזַק לֵב פַּרְעֹה וְלֹא שָׁמַע אֲלֵהֶם כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה

Pharoah hardened his heart and didn't listen. (*Shmot* 7:13)

How could it be good for us to strengthen our hearts but bad when Pharoah does it?

Well, there is a difference between a strong heart and a hardened one.

Here is what we know about Pharoah:

The Torah teaches that when God instructed Moses and Aaron to approach Pharoah, they needed to get up very early in the morning and find him as he went out to the Nile.

The midrash picks up on this language of getting up very early and asks, why was Pharaoh going to the water so early in the morning?

[Midrash Tanhuma, Vaera](#)

Because, the midrash answers: Pharaoh would boast that he was a god, and being a god, he had no need to go to the water to relieve himself. He went out early in the morning, in secret, so that no one would see him going to the bathroom.

Even before we learn that Pharaoh's heart is hardened, we learn that Pharaoh moves through the world acting as God and takes it to such an extreme, he attempts to deny or at least hide the needs of his human body. Pharaoh's heart is too hard to recognize the forces beyond himself. But his sense of one-ness is misguided; it is actually **alone-ness**. In Pharaoh's case, his hardening of his heart over and over is a manifestation of his believing that everything is and should be in his control—his body, his slaves, and all of nature. But all is not in his control. His belief that HE is God — or at least that he is supposed to be God — becomes his downfall.

This year after giving birth, I found myself navigating significant physical pain coupled with a baby who screamed every time we put him in his crib so sleep. It was humbling, at times even infuriating, to feel so controlled by things that were so small!

When will my baby fall asleep, how *long* will he scream before falling asleep, when will he wake up, when will my body heal, will it ever heal—the tension of living with those constant questions exhausted me. I despaired; I experienced anxiety; I raged. But so much was out of my control.

Now I know none of us here think that we are God. And whether or not we have read the classic book *Everyone Poops*, everyone here understands that we all go through the world both enabled by and also limited by our bodies and our bodies' needs. But most of us live with some desire for control, and not only of our bodies.

When we stiffen our hearts so much that we lose sight of the divinity in the world or when we cling too strongly to the illusion of control, we become like Pharaoh. But there is a way to have a strong heart that does not grow rigid.

How?

The answer is there, in our verse.

קוֹיָהּ, אֶל-יְהוָה חֲזַק וַיֵּאמֶץ לִבָּהּ וְקוֹיָהּ אֶל-יְהוָה

That is, on either side of strengthening our hearts is looking to God, is looking to connect with that which is greater than ourselves. To have strong but not hardened hearts is to reach for connection. When we reach for connection, we let go of some amount of control and open ourselves to possibility and to hope.

The Hebrew word *kaveh*, which we'll sing many times, comes from the root kuf, vav, heh, meaning to look to, to wait for, or to hope. Many of us are familiar with Hatikvah, the anthem of the Zionist movement and of the state of Israel, which means "The Hope."

But there is another meaning of this root word kaveh. Kuf, vav, heh also means to collect or to bind together, like the word mikveh, another word many of us know. What's the connection? A mikveh of water is a pool, a collection of water.

And tikvah doesn't just mean "the hope." In various places in Torah and in other ancient semitic languages, tikvah is a cord or a thread, the silk of a spider's web or a strand of rope. Tikvah is pieces of thread bound together, collected together to make something stronger.

And all of these different meanings are likely etymologically related. The same tension that creates a strand of rope or a spider's web, is the tension of enduring, of waiting — of hope.

One of the examples of “tikvah” in the Torah appears in the story of the Israelites’ conquest of Jericho. Before the Israelites attack the city, two Israelite spies enter the city and find an unlikely accomplice in Rahav, a prostitute who helps the spies by hiding them from the authorities and helping them escape back to safety. As they escape, Rahav lets down a *tikvah*, a red cord, from her window. That same cord then hangs from her window to communicate with the Israelites that they are to save her and her family during the conquest. (*Joshua 2:19-21*)

I can imagine the tension, both the fear and also the hope that Rahav felt as she helped the spies and then awaited the inevitable war. Rahav’s placing tikvah out her window is yes a literal cord, but she also places her hope.

She understands that there is so much not in her control, and her response is to lean into the tension by choosing faith and relationships. She ties literal and metaphorical threads of connection to both God and to the Israelite people.

So how do we let go of control and instead lean into the tension of hope?

We have to send out threads of connection over and over again.

In [Tractate Berachot](#) in the Talmud we learn: *Rabbi Chama son of Rabbi Chanina said: A person who prayed and saw that they were not answered should pray again, as it is stated: “**Look to Adonai, strengthen and bolster your heart, and Look to Adonai**” (Psalms 27:14).*

Brachot 32b

Rabbi Chama b'Rabbi Chanina expounds that our verse is about persistence and repetition. He says we must pray, bolster ourselves and then pray again, even when it feels like our prayers aren't being answered. Because hope is not believing that we will be answered or that everything will turn out alright. Hope is a spiritual practice, a muscle we must work. And prayer is hope in action.

Prayer is whatever it is that allows us to connect to the divine—it may be words of the siddur, or music, or meditation, or hiking, or painting, or going to a protest — whatever it is for each of us, we must do it over and over again.

Some of us may be skeptical, having heard the old adage:

'Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.'

But anyone here who has ever practiced anything—a sport, an instrument, a professional skill—knows that that’s not true.

Because as we practice our capacity for prayer, two things can happen—we can change and also the world can change.

And even if the change is not yet perceptible, connecting with the divine through prayer invites us into imagination, into the possibility of what could be.

Another way we practice the muscle of hope is by sending out threads of connections, of tikvah, to each other. As we learned, Pharoah believed all was in his control and he couldn’t see beyond himself to connect to God or to others—and he ultimately lost everything. Rahav realized that much was out of her control and she sent out threads of connection to God and to the Israelite people. Our threads of connection will hold us, tug us, pull us towards hope.

In *Charlotte's Web*, when Wilbur the pig asks Charlotte why she cared for him when he did nothing to deserve her help, she responds: "You have been my friend. That in itself is a tremendous thing."

We might think the thin threads we weave to others are
insignificant at times,
but they are truly, truly tremendous.

קִוֵּה, אֶל-יְהוָה חֲזַק וַיָּאֲמֵץ לְבָבְךָ וְקִוֵּה אֶל-יְהוָה

Kaveh el adonai. Chazak v'ya'amez libecha v'Kaveh el Adonai.

Let us be strong and courageous to move forward into the unknown, into what we cannot control. Just like last year, things will not go our way this year.

But a strong and courageous heart is one that takes a chance on God, that takes a chance on the world, that takes a chance on humanity without growing hardened. A strong and courageous heart knows we must travel through this world feeling the quiet pull of those tremendous threads of connection. And as we practice this muscle, this cycle, over and over again, may we open ourselves to change and to believing that the world too can also change for the better.

Shana tova.