

The Three Elements of Strength

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One of the purposes of fasting is to weaken us for a day. Temporary frailty promotes long-term strength. And so, now, in this demanding hour – in the slowness of the fast – I ask you: What makes us strong?

A long time ago there lived a Jew from the tribe of Dan who was the very essence of strength and vigor. His name was Samson. We read about him in the biblical book of Judges.

Hardly the prototype of a Jewish judge, Samson was a glorious physical specimen; the closest we ever came to a Jewish superman. The Greeks had Hercules and we had Samson, with his extraordinary strength, perfect body and the long-flowing, luxurious, sensual, never-cut hair of a Nazirite.

Samson was so strong that he could rip a lion to shreds with his bare hands. He could tear off ropes binding him as if they were melted butter. He could carry the heavy doors and gateposts of Gaza on his shoulders as if they were toys. He killed a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of an ass.

There was nothing understated about Samson. Brute force was his methodology. He came, he saw he conquered. There was no need for subtlety.

He had strong impulsive appetites. The man of beautiful physicality was ravenous for beautiful women. He felt entitled to any female he fancied. He once said to his incredulous father: “I noticed one of the Philistine women of Timnah; get her for me!” The Philistines were Israel’s fiercest enemies.

When his father responded: “Shimi, *kindeleh*, my boy, aren’t there any nice Jewish girls [from the Upper West Side of Dan] that interest you,” Samson snapped: “Get that one; she is the one who pleases me.”

One day Samson fell in love with Delilah. She was a Philistine woman from the Sorek Valley. Those of you who were on our Israel mission this year, we drove near that place on the way to the Gaza border.

When the Philistine leaders heard that Samson was cavorting with Delilah, they detected an opportunity to bring him down. They asked Delilah to discover the answer to the very question that I asked you:

Ba'meh kocho? What makes him strong?

And so Delilah asked Samson: *Hagida na li ba'meh kochacha?* “Tell me, what makes you strong.” Three times she asked and three times Samson lied to her.

Like anyone, I suppose, Delilah did not appreciate her lover deceiving her. She complained: “How can you say you love me if you do not confide in me? You have deceived me three times.”

And so, as the Bible says, frustrated and wearied to death by her, Samson confided in Delilah. “No razor has ever touched my head, for I have been a Nazirite to God since I was in my mother’s womb. If my hair were cut, my strength would leave me and I should become as weak as an ordinary man.”

Sensing that he had finally told her the truth, Delilah lulled Samson to sleep and summoned the Philistine leaders, who sheared his hair, gouged out his eyes and imprisoned him in Gaza. Invincible Samson was “eyeless in Gaza at the Mill with the slaves.” The man of all physical strength was defeated by the woman of no physical strength.

And so, now, at our lowest energy level of the year, when we are at our weakest physically, I ask you to think with me:

Ba'meh kochacha?

What makes us strong?

The Talmud, looking at the story of Samson, gives us one terse response. In a word play on Delilah’s name - *De'lila* in Hebrew – which sounds like the word *dallal* – to weaken – the rabbis wrote:

dildela et kocho; She weakened his physical strength

dildela et libbo; She weakened his heart

dildela et ma'assav: She weakened his deeds

(Sotah 9b)

In this one terse sentence, the Sages teach us that there are three elements to strength: the strength of body; the strength of character and the strength of action. All three are important for a vigorous, meaningful and complete life.

Physical Strength

Let us think first of the importance of our physical strength.

We do not emphasize enough the miracle of a working body. We often take our health for granted, until such time as we can no longer do what we always did. Full and vigorous health is a source of our strength and well being. Samson was not wrong about that. If we are healthy we are more likely to develop all of our potential; and thus, grow more complete, and more satisfied.

There is a direct connection between strong bodies and strong minds: As Shakespeare wrote: “There was never yet [a] philosopher that could endure the toothache patiently.” If you have any doubt about this, come with me one day on a hospital visit and see for yourself how physical frailty affects emotional well being. Even a toothache incapacitates us.

Judaism is emphatic: We have an obligation to take care of ourselves. Self-regard is a key ingredient for self-preservation. We cannot produce our best if we do not feel our best. We have always rejected philosophies of denial and deprivation as contrary to human nature. We do not think that God wants us to suffer. We see nothing ennobling in poverty.

We have always believed that we are much more likely to improve ourselves and society on a full stomach and a healthy constitution. Let us not underestimate the importance of a well-functioning digestive system.

We have an obligation to eat well, exercise well, live well, work well, and to relax well. We cannot allow ourselves to be run to the ground. If we are overwhelmed by physical discomfort life is less enjoyable. We must focus on ourselves and our health. We must spend time on ourselves. To be good to others we must be good to ourselves.

And if our bodies are functioning well, it is a great blessing. Jews express gratitude to God every day for another day of health.

And there is nothing wrong – in fact – there is much right – about physical beauty. We are not robots. We are sensual beings. One of the distinctive characteristics of being human is that we, alone, from all the creatures of the universe, admire beauty. Samson was not wrong about that either. For the thousands who lined up to view the Alexander McQueen exhibit this summer there was no utilitarian purpose; it is just pleasure and beauty that we prize and cherish.

We love aesthetic beauty; we love artistic beauty; and we love physical beauty. There are some human beings who are so magnificent as to take your breath away. There is a place for this in our society. I do not denigrate those who walk the Red Carpet: With or without additional nip and tuck work, such a collection of stunning human specimens; it causes you to proclaim: Blessed be the Eternal One Who has created such beauty.

I am not suggesting that we strive to be what we are not. Most of us are not endowed with exceptional beauty. But we should, nonetheless, pay attention to our aesthetic selves. It is important to our self-esteem, which in turn is critical to our well being.

Strength of the Heart

But the sages do not stop here. If all we care about is the strength of our bodies; if we aspire only to aesthetic beauty, then we will live like Samson: ascendant for a while but eventually brought low. As our strength diminishes and our beauty fades, like Samson, we will become figures of ridicule in the eyes of others.

And therefore, the Sages move quickly to the second source of strength: *Lev* – the strength of your heart; the power of your will; the depth of your understanding. Our physicality is “not meant to rule [us] but to subserve where wisdom bears command.”

The Rabbis realized that Samson squandered his God-given physical gifts and frittered them away for little gain. He destroyed himself. His muscles were strong but his heart was weak.

And thus, in the end, Samson was a failure. He had no lasting impact on Jewish history. He was the very picture of health but he died young. He did not free the Israelites from the Philistines and he left nothing behind; no document, no institution, no followers.

He could slay a thousand Philistines in one mighty blow but could not deliver his people, who remained oppressed for centuries. It was King David who finally defeated the Philistines. David was half the size of Samson, but twice the man. He was a poet with a strong and sensitive heart. He was a deep thinker.

It is a mistake to perceive strength only in its physical dimension. This was Samson’s fatal flaw. It was not that he was healthy and strong. That was a good thing. It was that this was all he cared about. He was a judge in Israel – and he cared only about pumping iron. His problem was not that he spent time in the gym; it was that he spent all his time in the gym. His problem was not that he spent time arranging his long, never-cut Nazirite hair; it was that he spent all his time at the stylist.

The Greeks admired beauty and strength for their own sake. It was enough that Hercules be beautiful and strong. For the Jews, physical strength un-tethered to emotional strength is untenable. Chiseled abs enslaved to a marble heart is unsustainable.

Beauty and brawn alone cannot be our defining features. Some people are born physically challenged or become physically disabled. Others will never grow strong. For the rest of us, inevitably, our strength diminishes and our beauty fades. If we have the great good fortune to live long, all of us, at some point, will become physically diminished. How then can brawn and beauty be the supreme measure of the self?

It is one thing to be a fan of peak physical performance; to enjoy, and even respect, the stunning accomplishments of athletes and the exquisite beauty of models. It is quite another thing to be obsessed by them. We have a tendency today to worship physicality and to assign it importance way beyond its proper proportion.

Americans are obsessed with the cult of youth. Multi-billion dollar industries know this about us and promise us that we will never have to grow old. They sell us elixirs that feed our vanity. "Youth! Youth! There is absolutely nothing in the world but youth," said Lord Henry to Dorian Gray.

It is one thing to spruce ourselves up. It is quite another to idolize youth. It is one thing to flip on reality T.V at the end of a long day. It is quite another to worship Snooki.

Looking at his repulsive picture before destroying it, Dorian Gray, who never aged, ultimately concluded: "It was his beauty that had ruined him, his beauty and the youth that he had prayed for. His beauty had been to him but a mask, his youth but a mockery. What was youth at best: A green, an unripe time – a time of shallow moods and sickly thoughts. Youth had spoiled him."

If we have staked our entire sense of self on the springtime of our days, we will have nothing left for the remaining seasons. After all, athletes' skills decline quickly, and even models eventually succumb to gravity.

We have gone way beyond healthy self-regard into shallow self-obsession. Excessive self-regard is a form of idolatry; the dark idolatry of self. We are obsessed with ourselves. We are obsessed with our own beauty. We have become narcissists.

We are quick to identify our own needs, but slow to identify the needs of others. We are quick to satisfy our own needs, but slow to satisfy the needs of others. Like Samson, we have abundant physical stamina but lack moral vigor.

Life is not only about ourselves; we must also think of others. I realize that we live in an advanced technological age, with its instant relationships and virtual friendships, but these are no substitutes for permanent relationships and real friendships. Facebook is no substitute for face time. Human beings crave connection, not isolation.

While too little self-focus leaves us dangerously empty, too much self-focus leaves us dangerously full. It is over-appreciation of the self, and the selfishness this engenders, that explain many of our current difficulties. Many of our national problems are either caused or exacerbated by excessive self-regard. We are full of ourselves.

Too few of us are prepared to endure common sacrifice. There is little impulse to share; little talent to give; little feeling of commonality or solidarity. Are we not bound to give something back; to perform some acts of self-denying service, in exchange for all that we have received in this generation and that was bequeathed to us from generations past?

It is wrong, selfish, self-defeating, cruel and immoral to cut the welfare of those who can least afford it without asking those who are strongest to contribute as well. It is wrong to take the world as an udder only to feed yourself.

Are your pains different than their pains? Do you suffer more than them? When you are in need, it is real need, but when they are in need, we preach the salve of living within our national means? Are his burdens easier for him to bear than your burdens?

Where is our sense of duty? Where is our sense of the common good?

We forget that our purpose is not only to be strong. We must be concerned with the proper use of our strength. If we use our strength only to rise above others without carrying them with us, we will create a society that is weak at its base and prone to collapse. No edifice can long endure when the base is weak and the pillars rest on sand.

How many of us know people who care little for the weaknesses of others as long as they are strong? How many of us know people who care little for the squalor of others as long as they are comfortable? The world can crack up as long as my house is spared. The city can go hungry as long as my freezer is full.

To see our fellows' struggles without some effect on us is a form of death. Something has died inside of us.

We look at the state of our Union; with its disunited, dysfunctional and disregarding political class; all selfishness and no sympathy; all passion and no persuasion; and we are reminded of the words of the poet Yeats: "The best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity."

Get a grip! We are tired of your incessant partisanship and we grow weary of your self-absorption. You are public servants, and above all, to serve the public is a moral responsibility.

The people are hungry. Why don't you ask us to share? We don't want a lecture in economic theory from you. He needs a job; not platitudes. His family needs to eat; you owe him your sympathetic understanding and real concern. Unless your theory can give him a paycheck, hang it up; we are not interested now.

Shall we say to the unemployed: go find a job when there are no jobs?
Shall we say to the poor: educate your children when there are no good schools?
Shall we say to the lowly: pull yourself up when he has no bootstraps?
Shall we say to the hungry: eat well when junk food is all they can afford?

He doesn't want a free lunch. He wants to work. Work gives dignity.

Why don't you ask us to contribute? Why do you always tell us that the solution to our fiscal problems is to shop and spend on ourselves? The solution to our national problems is to turn inwards: let each be self-absorbed. The consumer drives the economy; so consume. Don't worry about anything else.

We do not want to be treated as cogs in an economic wheel. We want you to inspire us to do better; to light a fire under us: this is what true leadership is about.

Samson's problem was not that he was strong; it was that he was strong only when it came to himself. He was the leader, but he thought of no one but himself. And in the end, his strength was a mirage. His iron façade masked a rusted core.

Ba'meh kochecha? What makes you strong: a strong *lev* – a strong heart; strength of character; a strong will that bends our self-regard toward others.

The Strength of our Deeds

But even a strong heart is not enough. Our strengths must produce results. And therefore, the Rabbis move quickly to the third element of strength: *Ma'assim* – deeds. We must also be strong in deeds.

Deeds are the consequence – the manifestation – of our strengths. If we are all talk and no action; all pumped up energy and no effect – we are only partially complete. It was Samson's deeds that the Philistines feared most. Would he be able to assemble, organize and use his strengths against them?

And hence, the rabbis say: Delilah – *dildelah et kocho* – she weakened Samson's body; *dildelah et libbo* – she weakened his will; and *dildelah et ma'assav* – she weakened his deeds.

Strength of deeds is the most important of all. In Judaism, it is the deeds that count the most. Piety is in performance. A strong body is good; a strong heart is even better. But strong actions are the best. Good intentions are desirable, but good outcomes are required. Our energies must also have concrete results; to leave a mark on the world; to make a difference. Action is the result of every sound philosophy.

Many philosophies are about resignation: to turn the other cheek; to withdraw from the trials, tribulations and insignificance of the world, patiently awaiting our passage through nature to eternity. The goal is the next world.

Judaism is not primarily about the next world; it is about the here and now. It is not about resignation, it is about protest, struggle and opposition. Much of the spice and enjoyment of life are in the struggle.

Our task is never finished. The Promised Land is always beyond the horizon. We never really arrive. Arrival is death. As long as we live, we pursue.

The American Founding Fathers identified the pursuit of happiness, not the arrival. They realized that if we ever actually arrived at happiness we would be miserable. No one can endure total contentment. Even Adam and Eve were restless in Paradise. We can only be happy when we do not make happiness the central objective of our lives.

It is said that Samuel Butler conceived even of heaven as slightly aggravating. What a wonderful thought: even heaven has its niggling frustrations.

The Jewish Founding Fathers, concerned more about obligations than rights, also stressed the pursuit – the pursuit of justice, not the arrival; repair, not completion. They, too, realized that arrival and completion are unachievable on earth; and yet our task is to continue the pursuit.

Somewhere along the way we have lost our way. We have come to define happiness as the arrival: the goal is a life of bliss; with no concerns, no worries and no problems. Such a life is squandered potential. Too much tranquility is not good for us. It is dull and boring. We need the good fight.

We never reach the goal. So you got the job you wanted: your problems have only just begun. So you got the apartment you sought: the payments extend for thirty years. So you got the partner you were searching the world for: your challenges are only beginning. So you got the children you wanted: the anxieties and exhaustion of child-rearing await you. So you got the salary you thought would be sufficient. Within a year it's not enough.

Problems beget problems. They never end. You may spend your whole life studying. You will never know enough. You may dedicate your entire life to the goal – you are bound to fall short.

Robert Louis Stevenson wrote:

“It is true that we shall never reach the goal; it is even more probable that there is no such place. And if we lived for centuries and were endowed with the powers of a god, we should find ourselves not much nearer to what we wanted at the end.

O toiling hands of mortals! Feet traveling ye know not wither! Soon, soon it seems to you – you must come forth on some conspicuous hilltop, and but a little way further against the setting sun, descry the spires of El Dorado.

Little do ye know your own blessedness. For to travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive – and the true success is to labor.”

Our goal is not to live lives of ease. Our goal is to live in creative tension, our grasp constantly exceeding our reach. Movement, not rest, is the goal of life. Lack of movement is death. Motion is the cause of all life.

I believe that what we fear most is not our actual deaths. What we fear most is incapacity; an inability to produce; a cessation of usefulness. What we fear most is lying in bed or languishing alone, unable to get noticed, our world narrowed to our immediate concerns and bodily needs. No one sees and no one cares. We are left alone, ignored as so much wasted matter.

What we fear more than dying is being left for dead.

And so, the final message of the Rabbis is this: No matter how compromised our bodies may be; no matter how troubled our hearts; keep moving, keep producing, keep performing. Keep the pursuit of goals alive.

Even if we are not as energetic as we once were; even if we are physically diminished or were never physically whole; even if we have suffered disability and loss – strive to move forward. We can still make a difference. We may not be able to do what we once did, but we can still have an impact.

This is the final lesson of the Samson saga. His last deed – the only act that the Bible considers worthy - was performed when his strength was severely compromised. He could no longer do what he did in his prime.

On the last day of his life, the blind Samson was brought in chains to the temple of the Philistines who were celebrating a great sacrifice to their god. His hair had begun to grow back in prison. He leaned against the two middle pillars that held the temple up and with one final burst of strength, ripped the pillars and the Temple came crashing down. Thus Samson purchased time for the Israelites to survive until better leaders came to their defense.

Even on our last day we can do something heroic. Even as our strength diminishes we can still be useful.

And so: what makes us strong? We should strive to be healthy. A strong body is a blessing. But even more important is a strong heart. Without a strong will, a strong body is wasted. But most important of all, is the strength of our deeds. Without strong actions, strong values are squandered.

And when we have all three strengths; and when they are in balance with each other and in harmony with the world, then we shall live at our best.

The Bible tells us that one day while Samson was in the field a full-grown lion came roaring at him. Samson tore the lion to pieces with his bare hands, and left the carcass to rot.

A year later he returned to that spot and noticed that inside the skeleton was a swarm of bees that had produced honey. Samson concluded: *Me'az yatza matok*:

Out of the strong came something sweet.

This is the goal of all of our energies: to become strong; and out of the strong, something sweet.