



HIGH HOLIDAYS

Yom Kippur 2

Golden Calf To Buchenwald: Breaking Is Stronger Than Fixing

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GOLDEN CALF TO BUCHENWAL: BREAKING IS STRONGER THAN FIXING

ABSTRACT

A Jew's strength does not come from his body.

And Hakoah-Vienna, a Zionistic, all-Jewish soccer club that won Austria's National Championship in 1924-25, is proof.

The founder of Hakoah, HaKoach, "the strength," was murdered in Auschwitz and penned these words in Buchenwald: *wir wollen trotzdem Ja zum Leben sagen*, "we nevertheless shall say "yes" to life."

Jews never worshipped the body. Indeed, the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur, is all about removing oneself from physical needs and refraining from all bodily pleasures.

We fast, don't wear leather shoes, don't bathe or beauty, do not have intimate relations, do not work, all based on the verse that states: *It is a Sabbath of rest for you, and you shall afflict yourselves. It is an eternal statute.*¹

Sacredness and holiness is directly collated to afflicting the body and removing it from materialism.

Hakoah, the secret to true koach, lies in the final three words of Rashi's Torah commentary: **יִישַׁר כַּחַךְ שֶׁשֶׁבַרְתָּ**, "strength to you for breaking them!"

Yashar kochacha sheshabarta, strength is found not in what you can fix, but in what you are willing to break.

1. The Eternal Power of Yizkor

We stand here on the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur. In just a few moments we will begin the Yizkor service, remembering and memorializing our loved ones who have ascended this mortal plain and passed on to a higher realm.

Yom Kippur is a testament and celebration of Jewish perseverance and strength. And so is Yizkor.

Yom Kippur memorializes and commemorates the day G-d forgave Israel gave us the second set of Tablets. On Yom Kippur the Jewish people overcame the breaking of the Tablets, and persevered even in the face of G-d Himself, who wanted to end His relationship with Israel after the sin of the Golden Calf.

Yizkor memorializes and commemorates the eternity and perseverance of the Jewish soul. Even when the body fades away, the soul burns bright and true. Even when a soul passes, Yizkor reminds us that it does not pass away but it passes to a higher spiritual realm.

¹ Leviticus 16:31.

Yes, Yizkor and Yom Kippur are testaments and celebrations of Jewish perseverance and strength.

And Jewish perseverance, endurance, and strength has nothing to do with muscles.

2. Lifting Waits

A new guy in Shul, Moshe, is called up asked to do Hagbah, to lift the Torah after its reading. Moshe was a scrawny, skinny, intellectual academic professor with three PhDs. It was a pitiful sight. He could barely lift the Sefer Torah, almost dropping it four times. Three young men had to hold up the Torah for him.

Red faced and humiliated Moshe ran off the bimah and kept his head down for the rest of davening.

He was very embarrassed and made a resolution to return to shul only once he's big and strong like a linebacker. Moshe subscribes to two gyms, one cycling class, and hires a personal trainer. For the next few months, he works out, lifts weights, does push ups, sit ups and pull ups. His muscles are bulging. The skinny doctor of philosophy is ripped and toned and bursting like a yenta with a rumor in her purse.

He's ready.

The next Shabbos, Moshe goes to Shul all excited and ready for his moment. Suddenly he hears the Gabbai call his name, "Yaamod, Moshe ben..." so he rushes up to the Bima, grabs the Sefer Torah, lifts it high and opens up at least 10 columns. Swings it to the left and then to the right, and puts it proudly down with a beaming smile on his face and rippling biceps under his Tallit.

He's feeling like a million bucks. He turns to the Gabbai and, loud enough for the whole Shul to hear, he says, "Nu, you ever saw such a Hagbah in your life!"

Somewhat abashedly, the Gabbai says, "Moshe, it was a great... but I called you up for Shlishi..."

3. Muscular Judaism

Simcha Südfeld grew up in a religious home in Pest, Hungary and later changed his name to Max Nordau. He co-founded the World Zionist Organization together with Theodor Herzl.

He also developed *Muskeljudentum*, or Muscular Judaism. The term refers to the cultivation of mental and physical properties, such as mental and physical strengths, agility and discipline, which all will be necessary for the national revival of the Jewish people. The characteristics of the muscular Jews are the exact opposite, an antithesis, of the Diaspora Jew, especially in Eastern Europe, as shown in the anti-Semitic literature and in the Haskalah movement's literature. Nordau saw the promotion of muscular, athletic Jews as a counterpoint to such depictions of Jews as a weak people. In addition, the "muscular" Jew is the opposite of the rabbinic

or Haskalah Jew — the man of letters, the intellectual — who was said to be busy all his life engaging with esoteric subjects. His body, and his will, grew weak.²

Muscular Judaism asserted that, like Moshe, the Jew has to be strong and muscular to lift up and raise — Hagbah! — the future of the Jewish nation. Torah and scholarship would not suffice. Rather, he asserted, Jewish strength lies much more in the body than in the soul. Or, perhaps, the body itself was the Jew’s true soul.

4. Hakoah-Vienna

Perhaps the most prominent and successful offspring of this concept was an Austrian football club named Hakoah-Vienna.

This from a recent Atlantic article on soccer, socialism, and capitalism:

Perhaps the most striking example is from Austria. In 1909, two Austrian Zionists, Fritz “Beda” Löhner and Ignaz Herman Körner, founded the club Hakoah Vienna to raise funds for Zionism. Hakoah—the name means “strength” in Hebrew—won the Austrian championship in 1925, before touring the U.S. the following year, drawing enormous crowds. In New York City, the club played in front of more than 40,000 fans—the biggest crowd for a soccer game in the U.S. for decades to come.³

A well-regarded book by the American journalist Franklin Foer, entitled *How Soccer Explains the World: An Unlikely Theory of Globalization*, elaborates on Hakoah-Vienna.

A pair of Austrian Zionists, cabaret librettist (Kabarettist) Fritz “Beda” Löhner and dentist Ignaz Herman Körner, founded the club in 1909. Influenced by Max Nordau’s doctrine of “Muscular Judaism” (German: Muskeljudentum), they named the club “Hakoah” (Hebrew: הכוח), meaning “the strength” or “the power” in Hebrew.

As an early brochure advertised, Hakoah was founded upon the Latin dictum *mens sana in corpore sano*, meaning: “a sound mind in a sound body,” or “a healthy mind in a healthy body.”

[The following paragraph is optional, including more details:

Hakoah Vienna was one of the first football teams to market themselves globally by travelling frequently where they would attract thousands of Jewish fans to their matches against local teams in cities such as London and New York. Support for Hakoah spread around Europe rapidly as Jews as far as Russia and the United States avidly supported Hakoah Vienna who took advantage of such support by setting up very successful tours and friendlies. As the first “Jewish” team, Hakoah attracted the attention of prominent Jewish figures

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muscular_Judaism

³ <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/09/us-europe-soccer-football/598012/>

including author Franz Kafka. In the offseason, Hakoah traveled around the world marketing their success. However, instead of selling jerseys and other merchandise, Hakoah sold Zionism. In preparation for their visits, they sent promoters ahead of the team in order to generate buzz and attract Jewish fans. Hakoah was not new to the notion of global tours; the organization's other teams, like swimming and wrestling had already traveled around the world and won a collection of medals. However, the team did often face anti-Semitism during its world travels. The club created an unconventional form of security, having the Hakoah wrestling team accompany them and act as their personal bodyguards.]

Hakoah was one of the most successful soccer clubs of its time, winning Austria's National Championship in 1924-25.

When the Nazis rose to power they seized the club assets and stadium.

5. Hakoah-Vienna

On April 1, 1938, almost immediately after the Anschluss (the Austrian annexation to Nazi Germany, in mid-March 1938, Fritz Löhner, one of Hakoah's founders, was arrested and deported to the Dachau concentration camp. On September 23, 1938, he was transferred to Buchenwald. There, together with his fellow prisoner Hermann Leopoldi at the end of 1938, he composed the famous anthem of the concentration camp, Das Buchenwaldlied ("The Buchenwald Song"):

O Buchenwald, I cannot forget you,
because you are my fate.
Only he who leaves you can appreciate
how wonderful freedom is!
O Buchenwald, we don't cry and complain;
and whatever our destiny may be,
we nevertheless shall say "yes" to life:
for once the day comes, we shall be free!

The line *wir wollen trotzdem Ja zum Leben sagen*, "we nevertheless shall say "yes" to life". was adopted by the Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl for the German title of his 1946 book *Man's Search for Meaning*.

On December 4, 1942, Fritz Löhner, the founder of Hakoah and author of the words *wir wollen trotzdem Ja zum Leben sagen*, "we nevertheless shall say "yes" to life" was beaten to death in the Auschwitz III Monowitz concentration camp.

6. Koach: What Is Jewish Strength?

Hakoah means the strength. But what really is Jewish koach, Jewish strength? Are we here for 4,000 years because of our muscular bodies or athletic physiques? Is that really the secret of Jewish strength?

Is that the strength and power of Yizkor, remembering muscular bodies? Is that the strength and power of Yom Kippur, worshipping and atoning for soundness of flesh?

The exact opposite seems to be true. The Torah clearly describes Yom Kippur. *It is a Sabbath of rest for you, and you shall afflict yourselves. It is an eternal statute.*⁴ Based on these words of afflicting ourselves, on Yom Kippur we do not eat or drink, we don't wear leather shoes, don't bathe or beautify, do not have intimate relations, do not work, definitely do not workout.

The holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur, is all about removing oneself from physical needs and refraining from all bodily pleasures. Fasting and afflicting is the opposite of muscular.

Yom Kippur - the holiest day of the year - epitomizes the essential power of the Jew: our eternal soul, the divine soul. To experience pure soul, the sacredness and holiness of Yom Kippur, requires afflicting the body and removing it as much as possible from materialism. The Torah emphatically describes the *koach*, the power of the Jew, of Yom Kippur, of Yizkor, as a spiritual power, not one defined by muscles or physique.

The definition of Jewish *koach* is in the last Rashi of the Torah. And in Fritz Löhner's line *wir wollen trotzdem Ja zum Leben sagen*, "we nevertheless shall say "yes" to life."

7. Sometimes Breaking Is Stronger Than Fixing

On the final three words of the Torah, *before the eyes of all Israel*, Rashi concludes his Torah commentary with three words quoted from the Talmud: **יִישַׁר כַּחךְ שֶׁשֶׁבַרְתָּ**, "strength to you for breaking them!"⁵

This is referring to Moses breaking the Tablets on the mountain after he comes down with them and sees Israel sinning with the Golden Calf.

Firstly, why is G-d thanking Moses for breaking the tablets?

Secondly, why indeed did Moses break the tablets? Would it not make more sense to hold it over the Jews' heads as proof of wrongdoing?

⁴ Leviticus 16:31.

⁵ Shabbar 87a.

Thirdly, and to our theme, how is breaking something, especially something holy, the sign of true strength?

And how does all of this talk to the eternal strength of the Jewish people immortalized on Yom Kippur, when we receive the second, complete tablets and resonate personally as we enter Yizkor?

Breaking the tablets was Moses' single greatest feat of strength and act of courage. Nothing else he did, oh and how did, could compare.

Moses comes down from the mountain holding the fresh tablets, still with the new divine smell to them, and sees the Golden Calf.

Moses knows G-d. He knows that G-d would consider this the end of His relationship with the Jewish people. The Golden Calf is an overt act of betrayal.

Moses is holding in his hands the Ketubah, the *Luchot*, the Torah, the marriage contract between G-d and Israel. So what does Moses do? Moses is What does the consummate humble leader do? He does the only thing possible to save the marriage. He does the most difficult, the strongest, the hardest thing a person could do.

Moses shatters the tablets. Moses literally breaks the contract. Moses says to G-d: What do you mean the Jews betrayed you with the Golden Calf? You and the Jews don't yet have a ratified agreement! There is no Ketubah! There is no marriage contract! There is no consummated relationship!

If there's no Ketubah, there's no marriage, and if there's no marriage you have no legal grounds for ending Your relationship with Israel!

To which G-d says to Moses: **יִישַׁר כַּחַךְ שֶׁשִּׁבַרְתָּ**, "strength to you for breaking them!" Thank you for shattering the vows so that they cannot be broken by Israel. Thank you for saving the Jewish people, for preserving My relationship with them, by demonstrating that the marriage contract (the tablets) were not received by them, thus rendering the marriage between G-s and the Jews unconsummated. And truly they yet were not. Until Yom Kippur.

And truly they yet were not yet married. Until Yom Kippur.

On Yom Kippur G-d forgives Israel, giving us the second tablets, the whole and complete Ketubah testifying and ratifying our *binyan adei ad*, our eternal edifice that we build together with and for G-d

8. Conclusion: Yizkor Strong

We do not know G-d's mysterious ways, why one life is chosen to live here and another there, one soul in a body for this many years and another for that many years. One thing we do know: Hakoah, the true *koach* and strength of a Jew is in living by the words *wir wollen trotzdem Ja zum Leben sagen*, "we nevertheless shall say

“yes” to life.”

Even in the darkest of the dark, in the Golden Calf or Buchenwald, the Jew is indestructible because we always choose life.

Even when G-d Himself seems to want to end the relationship, we do the strongest thing possible: we break the rules, we break the tablets and say: You cannot end our lives together because they have not yet begun; our relationship cannot be over because we're just starting it.

When we live like this, like Moses, G-d tells us **יִישַׁר כַּחךְ שֶׁשִׁבַּרְתָּ**, “strength to you for breaking them!” And the result is Yom Kippur and the complete tablets, our Ketubah.

As we enter Yizkor remember this strength: Our loved ones have not really passed away; they have but passed on to a higher realm. And maybe, just maybe, we have to do the strongest thing possible: we have to break through the facades and false contracts of this world to get through and see the light that has always been shining.

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