

Martin Buber once said that the task of the biblical translator is to overcome "the leprosy of fluency," a disease of the spirit that can lead us to imagine that we already know what we are reading, causing us blithely and triumphantly to read past the text. The effective translator must, therefore, reformulate the word or the words of the text to produce a new encounter with its language and thus facilitate a new hearing and a new understanding. The spiritual task of interpretation, likewise, is to affect or alter the pace of reading so that one's eye and ear can be addressed by the text's words and sounds—and thus reveal an ex-

panded or new sense of life and its dynamics. The pace of technology and the patterns of modernity pervert this vital task. The rhythm of reading must, therefore, be restored to the rhythm of breathing, to the cadence of the cantillation marks of the sacred text. Only then will the individual absorb the texts with his or her life breath and begin to read liturgically, as a rite of passage to a different level of meaning. And only then may the contemporary idolization of technique and information be transformed, and the sacred text restored as a living teaching and instruction, for the constant renewal of the self.

### HAZAK HAZAK V'NITHAZZEK

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It is the custom in the synagogues of *Ashk'nazim* that when each book of the Torah is completed, the congregation rises and exclaims, "*Hazak hazak v'nithazzek!*" (Be strong, be strong, and let us summon up our strength!). The phrase is an expansion of the exhortation of King David's general Joab before battle, "Be strong and let us summon up our strength [*hazak v'nithazzak*] for the sake of our people and the towns of our God" (2 Sam. 10:12).

Recitation of this phrase on completing a book of the Torah reflects the transformation of an exhortation to physical, military prowess into a wish for spiritual strength. This custom is first clearly seen in 19th-century Germany, where the briefer form "*Hazak v'nithazzak!*" (vocalized exactly as in the Bible) was addressed to the person who had the final *aliyah* of each book. Earlier, congregations would simply exclaim, "*Hazak!*" (Be strong!). *S'fardim* also used to follow the latter custom; but nowadays they say, "*Hazak u-varukh!*" (Be strong and blessed!) to each person who returns to sit after having an *aliyah*, just as *Ashk'nazim* exclaim, "*Yishar kohakha!*" (to a male) or "*Yishar kohakha!*" (to a female)—that is, "May your strength be firm!" (Contrary to popular opinion, this exclamation does not mean "May your strength be straight!" *Yishar* is not derived from ישר "straight," but from שרר "strong.")

Originally, whether after each *aliyah* or on the completion of a book, the exclamation "*Hazak!*" was addressed to the person who had read the Torah. It meant essentially, "More power to you!" Various explanations have been suggested for the practice. Because reading the Torah is a form of learning, some interpret the exclamation as encouragement to persist in learning the Torah. Others understand it as encouraging and wishing strength for the Torah reader because serious learning of the Torah—including accurately preparing the public reading with all of its vocalization, punctuation, and cantillation—can be exhausting. The phrase "*v'nithazzak,*" "let us summon our strength" or "let us be strengthened," was subsequently added (on the basis of 2 Sam. 10:12) because the entire congregation had completed the book along with the reader and wished to include itself in these wishes.

Other uses of these exclamations are instructive. Authors of *piyyutim* (liturgical poems) sometimes wrote their names and the word "*hazak*" at the end of their poems, and some writers of *zmirot* (table songs) spelled out their names acrostically, followed by "*hazak.*" Medieval scribes sometimes wrote "*hazak*" or "*hazak v'nithazzak*" at the end of manuscripts of books of the Bible and other Jewish

texts. These poets and scribes intended the words as self-encouragement and self-blessing on the completion of a difficult and painstaking task. Scribes often shed light on the intended meaning by adding other phrases, such as: "Blessed is He who gives strength to the weary and renews the vigor of the exhausted" (based on Isa. 40:29), "Be strong and let us exert ourselves in Torah and commandments," "May God . . . grant His servant strength to complete the entire Bible," and "We have been privileged to complete [this manuscript] in peace; may we be privileged to begin and complete [another] in peace." The last example is reminiscent of a custom once practiced in Italy when the Torah was completed on

*Simḥat Torah*: The cantor and the congregation would say, "*Hazak!* We have been privileged to begin and complete [it again] in peace."

In light of the meanings that have been found in all of these practices, we may understand "*Hazak hazak v'nithazzek!*" as follows:

*Hazak*—More power to you, Torah reader, who has worked so hard to read the Torah accurately and pleasantly! *Hazak*—Congratulations to you, the person who has had the final *aliyah* of the book! *V'nithazzek*—May you and we (the entire congregation) persist, study, read, and complete all the other books, drawing strength from the Torah!