



# A Vision of Power and Courage

Rabbi Avi Strausberg

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◆ **Aggadah**

There are a variety of translations available for aggadah: story, narrative, legend, or perhaps lore. In this case, some stories from the Talmud.

ELECTIONS ARE SIMULTANEOUSLY A TIME IN WHICH WE MAY FEEL EMPOWERED and disempowered. We are empowered in that this is our opportunity to make our voice heard and cast a vote. We vote for the candidate we most believe can bring the change so desperately needed in the world. It is also a time that can feel deeply disempowering. We can only vote once and ultimately our one vote will not decide an election. No matter how much we want change, no matter how many texts or phone calls we've sent to turn out the vote, we may find ourselves feeling powerless both in the moment of waiting for the results and in the aftermath of a new leader announced. Even as we may devote so much of ourselves to the political process as a means to shape the world, we may also feel poignantly aware of the limits of this sort of power.

Poised at the moment in which we as a people elect someone to serve in one of the highest positions of power in our country, we turn to Jewish texts for a more expansive sense of power to ask: what is power?

As we turn to the language of prayer, *aggadah*,◆ and poetry, we'll seek to explore an alternative model of power that subverts expectations and to uncover a vision of power rooted in compassion, courage, and kindness.

Before you dive into these texts, take a moment with yourself or with your *havruta* to reflect on your own understanding of power.

◇ (...And The Rain to Fall)  
In parentheses because it is only said for half the year, during the rainy season in Israel—Shemini Atzeret-Pesah.

◇ YHVH  
The Tetragrammaton, the unpronounceable four-letter name of God, for which we generally say “Adonai” = “My master” instead. In fact, “master” is a title, but the Tetragrammaton is a proper name—so here it is left untranslated.

1. What words or attributes come to mind when you hear the word power?
2. What is power?
3. Who is powerful?

## I. THE ONE WHO BRINGS THE RAINS

There is no being more emblematic of power than God. In our exploration of power, we turn to the second blessing of the Amidah, the blessing of *gevurah*, or strength, in which we praise God in God’s power.

Before you read the blessing, try to forget everything you know about it.

1. If you were to imagine writing a blessing about God’s power, what examples of God’s power would you point to?
2. How would you describe God’s power?

Once you’ve discussed this with your *havruta*, read the language of this blessing with new eyes and then take a look at the questions below.

### SOURCE #1 ס

גבורות	The Second Blessing of the Amidah
אתה גבור לעולם אדני,	You are mighty forever, Adonai
מחיה מתים אתה, רב להושיע.	Reviver of the dead are You, powerful to save.
(משיב הרוח ומוריד הגשם.)	(Causing the wind to blow and the rain to fall)◇
מכלכל חיים ברחמים,	Sustaining life with lovingkindness
מחיה מתים ברחמים רבים,	Reviving the dead with abundant mercy
סומך נופלים, ורופא חולים,	Upholding the fallen, and healing the sick, and
ומתיר אסורים,	releasing the bound
ומקים אמונתו לישגי עפר,	And keeping faith with those who sleep in dust.
מי כמוך בעל גבורות	Who is like You, Master of might,
ומי דומה לך,	Who is similar to You?
מלך ממית ומחיה	A King who causes death and life
ומצמיח ישועה.	and salvation to sprout.
ונאמן אתה להחיות מתים.	Faithful are You to revive the dead.
ברוך אתה ה',	Blessed are You, YHVH,◇
מחיה המתים.	who gives life to the dead.

◇ **Talmud Bavli Ta'anit**

The section of the Talmud called Ta'anit ("fast") is about fasts decreed because of a lack of rain. This passage has a number of stories about these fasts, of which we will learn two.

◇ **Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi]**

One of the most important rabbis in the Land of Israel, credited for compiling the Mishnah in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE.

◇ **Some Say**

There is some doubt whether the service leader was a rabbi or not.

**Questions from Rabbi Avi Strausberg**

1. According to this prayer, what defines God's power? In what ways is God powerful?
2. If this blessing is ultimately about praising God and God's power, what does this blessing teach us about what it means to be powerful?
3. What attributes of God's power described here align with your own associations around power? Are there aspects described here that surprise you as examples of God's power?
4. Why do you think we call on these attributes specifically in a time of prayer?

**Explanation from Rabbi Avi Strausberg**

In the above blessing, we praise God as the one who is powerful forever. We locate God's power in the many different actions God takes in the world. God is powerful in that God has the power to change the natural world: God has the ability to revive the dead and to bring the rain. These descriptions of God's power may align with traditional notions of what it means to be all-powerful. But, the blessing continues. God is also powerful in that God upholds the fallen, heals the sick, releases the bound. God sustains the living with lovingkindness. God, who revives the dead, is the ultimate affirmer of life. God is powerful in that God performs acts of *hesed*, acts of lovingkindness, in this world.

The writer of this blessing focuses not on a power that is located in one's ability to bend the will of others to one's own, to wage wars or seize lands. Rather, power seems connected to one's ability to better the lives of others through *hesed*. Power is the ability to create a healthier world, a more just world, a world in which more people are free.

**II. WHO IS THE RAINMAKER?**

In this second text, we turn to two short stories in the Talmud Bavli in which we encounter communities in drought, desperate for rain. Both stories open with a well-known and powerful communal leader going through the appropriate rituals prescribed to bring rain in times of drought. And, yet both leaders are unsuccessful in bringing the rain.

**SOURCE #2** ס

<p>תלמוד בבלי תענית דף כד עמוד א</p> <p>רבי גזר תעניתא</p> <p>ולא אתא מיטרא.</p> <p>נחית קמיה אילפא,</p> <p>ואמרי לה רבי אילפי.</p>	<p><b>Talmud Bavli Ta'anit 24a</b>◇</p> <p>Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi]◇ declared a fast but rain did not come.</p> <p>Ilfa descended [to lead the service before him], and some say◇ it was Rabbi Ilfi.</p>
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◆ Rav

One of Rabbi's students, Rav left the Land of Israel for Babylon and became one of the most prominent and important sages in the whole Talmud.

אמר: משיב הרוח,  
ונשא זיקא. מוריד הגשם, ואתא  
מיטרא.

He said: "Who makes the wind blow," and the wind blew. "And Who makes the rain come," and the rain came.

אמר ליה מאי עובדך?

Rabbi said to him: What are your [good] deeds (in the merit of which your prayers are answered so speedily)?

אמר ליה: דיירנא בקוסטא  
דחיקא דלית ביה חמרא לקידושא  
ואבדלתא טרחנא ואתינא חמרא  
לקידושא ואבדלתא ומפיקנא להו  
ידי חובתייהו.

He said to him: I live in an impoverished city, in which there is no wine for Kiddush or Havdallah. I go to the effort of bringing the residents wine for Kiddush and Havdallah, and I thereby enable them to fulfill their duty.

רב איקלע לההוא אתרא, גזר  
תעניתא, ולא אתא מיטרא.  
נחית קמיה שליחא דצבורא.  
אמר: משיב הרוח,  
ונשב זיקא. אמר  
מוריד הגשם,  
ואתא מיטרא.

Rav<sup>◆</sup> happened to come to a certain place where he decreed a fast but rain did not come. The prayer leader descended to lead the service before him, and said: "Who makes the wind blow," and the wind blew. He said: "And Who makes the rain fall," and the rain came.

אמר ליה: מאי עובדך?  
אמר ליה: מיקרי דרדקי אנא,  
ומקרינא לבני עניי כבני עתירי,  
וכל דלא אפשר ליה לא שקלינא  
מיניה מידי. ואית לי פירא דכוורי,  
וכל מאן דפשע, משחדינא ליה

Rav said to him: What are your [good] deeds? He said to him: I am a Bible teacher for children, and I teach the Bible to the children of the poor as to the children of the rich, and if there is anyone who cannot pay, I do not take anything from them. And I have a

מינייהו ומסדרינן	fishpond, and any child who neglects their studies,
ליה ומפייסינן ליה	I bribe them with the fish and calm them, and
עד דאתי וקרײ.	soothe them until they come and recite.

### Questions from Rabbi Avi Strausberg

1. *Who is powerful in these texts?*
2. *Who has the ability to end the drought and bring the rains? What’s surprising about this?*
3. *What is the source of their power?*
4. *How does this relate back to the blessing of strength (gevurah) in the amidah?*

### Explanation from Rabbi Avi Strausberg

In the two stories above, it is not the powerful and well-known communal leaders who bring the rains. In the first story it is Ilfa who brings the rain, and some say Rabbi Ilfi—we’re not even sure if this person carries the title of the rabbi. Whereas the great Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi’s decree of a fast had no effect, Ilfa simply stands to lead the community prayer, reciting the words “And brings the rains” and the rains come. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi seems surprised. He asks: What are your deeds such that your prayers are answered so speedily? In a sense, he asks, what makes you so powerful that you bring the rains where I have failed? Ilfi answers: I do the work of making sure that everyone has equal access to Kiddush and Havdallah. He does the work of justice, inclusion, and *hesed*.

Similarly, in our second story, Rav also decrees a fast but the rains do not come. This time it’s an unnamed prayer leader who descends to lead the services, says the words “and brings the rain” and the rains come. Like Rabbi, Rav seems surprised. Why have you succeeded where I have failed? Our unnamed leader answers: I am a teacher of children. I teach all of the children equally; I teach them with love and patience. Like Ilfa, he does the work of justice, inclusion, and *hesed*.

Who has the power to bring the rains in these texts? Who is like none other than God, the all-powerful God, the ultimate bringer of rains? It is the individuals who do these small, everyday acts of *hesed* for individuals in their communities.

### Section II: Closing Question

1. *What do these texts teach about power? What is powerful? Who is powerful?*

### III. ALL I CANNOT SAVE

In our final text, we turn to Adrienne Rich (1929-2012), an American poet of Jewish background.

#### SOURCE #3

**Adrienne Rich, All I Cannot Save**

My heart is moved by all I cannot save  
So much has been destroyed  
I have to cast my lot with those, who, age after age,  
Perversely, with no extraordinary  
Power, reconstitute the world.

#### Questions from Rabbi Avi Strausberg

1. *Who is powerful in this poem?*
2. *What does it mean to be powerful?*

#### Take a Step Back

We have explored an alternative vision of power rooted in our ability to transform the world and the lives of those around us through individual acts of *hesed*.

1. *How will you be powerful today?*
2. *What concrete act of hesed might you perform to help bring the rain?*

In this moment in which we may feel powerless, may we be like Ilfi and the school teacher. May we locate the source of our own power in our ability to perform small and large acts of *hesed* for one another. And may we recognize the places in our lives in which we do have power and cast our lot with those, who “perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world.”