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.
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.

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**SOURCE #1**

*בברevity*  
*The Second Blessing of the Amidah*

- **You are mighty forever, Adonai**  
- **Reviver of the dead are You, powerful to save.**
- **(Causing the wind to blow and the rain to fall)**
- **Sustaining life with lovingkindness**
- **Reviving the dead with abundant mercy**
- **Upholding the fallen, and healing the sick, and releasing the bound**
- **And keeping faith with those who sleep in dust.**
- **Who is like You, Master of might,**
- **Who is similar to You?**
- **A King who causes death and life and salvation to sprout.**
- **Faithful are You to revive the dead.**
- **Blessed are You, YHVH,**
- **who gives life to the dead.**
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

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Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi] declared a fast but rain did not come.

Ilfa descended [to lead the service before him], and some say it was Rabbi Ilfi.
He said: “Who makes the wind blow,” and the wind blew. “And Who makes the rain come,” and the rain came.

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

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.

Rav 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.

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
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 Havadallah. 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.”