



# Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

## Today's Torah

Jews have always been a community drawn together by virtue of Torah. No matter where you may be, we welcome you to the Ziegler community through Today's Torah e-mail.

**Shabbat Parashat Pekudei**  
**March 9, 2019 - 2 Adar II 5779**



**By: Rabbi Elliot Dorff**  
**Rector and Distinguished Professor of Philosophy**  
**American Jewish University**

### The Blessings of Completion

Torah Reading: Exodus 38:21 – 40:38

Haftarah Reading: 1 Kings 7:51 – 8:21

***“And when Moses saw that they had performed all the tasks – as the Lord had commanded, so they had done – Moses blessed them.” (Exodus 39:43)***

What is completing a task a source of blessing? One reason is that one feels a sense of accomplishment – one set out to do something and successfully completed the task. That is especially the case when, as in this case, a group has never been called on to do something like this, and so there is no record of accomplishment to demonstrate that one can, and so finishing the task relieves the builders of anxiety that they may well have in trying to do something that they never did before. Another reason that finishing a task is a source of blessing is the pride that one can legitimately have upon completing a task on which one has embarked: one can point proudly to what one has done. Yet another is sense that one can contribute to the world in meaningful ways, that we human beings have the ability to see a need and to meet it. In this case, there is also the satisfaction of doing what God has asked of us, so that the completion is not only a blessing for us but for us. The same feeling may apply when one has done something that is not directly commanded by God, as in this case, but that accomplishes a purpose that we know to be divine,

such as healing someone in body or spirit, ameliorating poverty, educating someone or making that possible, contributing compassion or beauty to the world, or building, renovating, or maintaining a synagogue, school, or social service agency that will enable people to worship, learn, and live more fully. All of these elements may be included in the response of Moses to the completion of the Tabernacle and the vestments of the people who would serve in it.

There is another indication in this week's Torah reading of the blessings of completion. Parashat Pikudei ends the Book of Exodus. Traditionally, as we end each of the five books of the Torah in our reading them in the synagogue, we say *hazak, hazak, v'nithazek*, "Be strong, be strong, and let us strengthen each other." In a rabbinic ruling by Rabbi Nechama Goldberg, approved by the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards in 2000, she traces the origins of this custom:

The earliest reference to the custom of saying *hazak* to one who reads from the Torah is found in HaManhig, written by Abraham ben Nathan ha-Yarhi, who wrote at the end of the twelfth and beginning of the thirteenth centuries regarding the customs of Jews of France, Germany and Spain. He writes:

As for the custom in France and Provence that all who read from the Torah, as they concluded, the hazzan would say to them in a loud voice, *hazak*, I have found support for this in *Bereshit Rabbah*, "Let not this Book of Teaching cease from your lips." The word *hazak* is used only to the one who holds the object in his hand, from which we learn that the Sefer Torah was in Joshua's lap. And God said to him, "Be strong and resolute [*hazak v'amatz*] (Deuteronomy 31:7, 23; Joshua 1:7)" From here, to the one who concludes the Torah reading we say to him, *hazak*.

According to the custom, *hazak* was recited to each person who read from the Torah. At that time, Torah reading customs were in flux. It was customary for each person who was called to the Torah to read for himself. As fewer people were able to read the Torah, especially with the appropriate trope, a designated reader replaced the congregant. The blessing of *hazak* was addressed to the reader. (Ha-Manhig refers only to the reader and does not distinguish a separate individual receiving an aliyah.) The citation from *Bereshit Rabbah* is used as proof-text that the person reading from the Torah (or reciting the blessings) should be holding on to the Torah. By inference, since God said *hazak* to Joshua while he was holding the Torah, we should also say *hazak* to one who holds the Torah:

R. Shimon b. Yohai said: The Book of Deuteronomy was an ensign for Joshua. When the Holy One, blessed be He, revealed Himself to him, He found him sitting with the Book of Deuteronomy in his hand. Said He to him, "Be strong, Joshua, be of good courage, Joshua; this book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth." (Josh. 1:8). Thereupon he took it and showed it to the orb of the sun which he apostrophised thus: "Even as I have not stood still from (studying) this, so do thou stand still before me!" Straightaway, "And the sun stood still," etc.

The next source to report on this custom is Orhot Ha'ayim by Aaron ben Jacob HaKohen of southern France writing in the beginning of the fourteenth century:

In *Bereshit Rabbah*, "This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth," teaches that the Sefer Torah was in Joshua's hand since one only uses *hazeh* ["this"] when one is holding the object in his

hand. And when he concludes, we say to him, *hazak ve'amatz*. From here, the custom derives to say to the one who concludes his reading in the Torah, *hazak*, and thus is the custom in France and Provence. However, in Spain, we only say this at the conclusion of the Torah exclusively, and each behaves according to his custom.

Rabbi Goldberg then addresses the question of whether those who read on a triennial cycle may say *hazak, hazak, ve'nithazek* after they conclude their reading that year of one of the five books of the Torah or only after they actually conclude the book in the third year of the triennial cycle. She concludes that the variation of practice that she had demonstrated in her research means that communities may do as they like with regard to reciting *hazak*, but she quotes Rabbi Richard Eisenberg, however, who was the rabbi that spelled out what exactly should be read each year in congregations adoption the triennial cycle and who says that saying *hazak* should be said only during the third cycle, when a community actually completes a book. In a rabbinic ruling that I wrote that was approved by the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards in 2015, I say the following:

On the other hand, there are also good reasons why a rabbi and congregation might want to say *hazak, hazak* when completing what they are going to read from a given book of the Torah, even if that does not include the end of the book. They are, after all, transitioning to the next book of the Torah the following week, and so they have indeed completed what they are going to read from the book that they have been reading for the past few months. Rituals often mark transitions, even if they are not complete; we say, for example, that Bar and Bat Mitzvah marks the transition into adulthood for liturgical purposes, even though thirteen-year-olds are not really adults in most other ways.

In that responsum I also point out that on fast days other than Yom Kippur, we skip from Exodus 32 to Exodus 34, despite the fact that the Mishnah says that we should not skip from one place in the Torah to another. Furthermore, on a Rosh Hodesh or Festival that falls on Shabbat, we say *hatzi kaddish* after the weekly Torah reading, thus marking its end, and then read from another Torah scroll the section relevant to Rosh Hodesh or the Festival. I therefore conclude as follows:

Therefore, it is preferable to use an alternative option that builds on both practices mentioned above. Specifically, one should read the Torah portion for the week and then recite *hatzi kaddish*. Then, because the end of the book is only a few columns away from the end of the readings of the second and even the first cycle so that it is not especially burdensome on the community to wait the minute or two for the Torah to be rolled to the last three verses of the book, even for what are commonly double portions at the end of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, roll the Torah to the end of the book and read the last three verses as *maftir*, followed by the proclamation of *hazak, hazak ve'nithazek*. This follows our practice of taking out only one Torah scroll on fast days because the two sections that we plan on reading are close to each other, but it has the advantage over our practice on fast days of inserting *hatzi kaddish* between them so as to mark the end of one reading and the beginning of another, in fulfillment of the Mishnah's principle.

So communities using the triennial cycle may either say *hazak* only during the third cycle, or they may follow the procedure above to enable them to say *hazak* each year when they come to the last reading that they will do that year from one of the books of the Torah. The latter practice enables them to experience the blessings of completion each year with a ritual to mark that they have now

completed their reading of this book in the Torah this year and are moving on to the reading the next book of the Torah. They can thus enjoy the many ways in which completion of a task is indeed a blessing, as Moses articulated long ago at the completion of the Tabernacle.

Shabbat shalom.

The full version of Rabbi Goldberg's ruling can be found at: [Hazak, Hazak, V'Nithazak](#).

The full version of my ruling can be found at [Hazak, Hazak, in the Triennial Cycle](#).

---

**Rabbi Elliot Dorff**, is Rector and Anne and Sol Dorff Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the American Jewish University, Visiting Professor at UCLA School of Law, and Chair of the Conservative Movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards. Author of over 200 articles and 12 books on Jewish thought, law, and ethics, and editor of 14 more books on those topics, his most recent book is *For the Love of God and People: A Philosophy of Jewish Law*.

---



## Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies  
American Jewish University  
15600 Mulholland Drive  
Bel Air, CA 90077  
310-440-1218  
[www.aju.edu/ziegler](http://www.aju.edu/ziegler)

Share this email:



[Manage](#) your preferences | [Opt out](#) using TrueRemove®

Got this as a forward? [Sign up](#) to receive our future emails.

View this email [online](#).

15600 Mulholland Dr.  
Bel Air, CA | 90077 US

This email was sent to [michelle.starkman@aju.edu](mailto:michelle.starkman@aju.edu).  
To continue receiving our emails, add us to your address book.

emma®