

# Having the Courage of Our Convictions

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Each time we complete a public reading of one of the Books of *Torah*, we stand and shout:

חֲזַק! חֲזַק! וְנִתְחַזְּקַ! !

*Chazak! Chazak! V'nit-chazeik!*

"Be strong! Be strong! And may we be strengthened!"

Why do we shout this? It is to remind us that we need God's strength to keep God's *Torah*. Obeying God's law is sometimes at great cost, and so to keep *Torah*, we have to have the courage of our convictions. Now that is an interesting saying – "Have the courage of our convictions!"

Here is what three dictionaries say the expression means:

1. "If you have the courage of your convictions, you are brave enough to do what you feel is right despite any pressure for you to do something different."
2. "It is the quality of mind or spirit that enables a person to face difficulty, danger, pain, etc., without fear; i.e. bravery."
3. "To act in accordance with one's beliefs, especially in the face of criticism and danger."

Let's consider the words "courage" and "convictions," as they are used in the expression "courage of our convictions." "Courage" is similar to the word "strength," and "convictions" is very close to the word "beliefs." Not just any beliefs, but beliefs in what is right, true, and virtuous. And where do we get such beliefs? Of course, from the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit. So, the first thing we need to realize is that before we can have the "courage of our convictions" we must have convictions – biblical convictions – and we must hold them so strongly, that we are willing to endure consequences and persecution from those who oppose God's values.

Having the courage of our convictions is not found in the Bible in so many words, but it's principle most certainly is. In fact, the Bible is replete with illustrations of men and women who tenaciously held to their convictions in the face of danger, hardship, and sometimes even death.

Let me share a few of these with you. In Joshua 1:6-9, God said to Joshua:

"Be strong, be bold; for you will cause this people to inherit the land I swore to their fathers I would give them. Only be strong and very bold in taking care to follow all the *Torah* which Moshe my servant ordered you to follow; do not turn from it either to the right or to the left; then you will succeed wherever you go. Yes, keep this book of the *Torah* on your lips, and meditate on it day and night, so that you will take care to act according to everything written in it. Then your undertakings will prosper, and you will succeed. Haven't I ordered you, 'Be

strong, be bold'? So don't be afraid or downhearted, because *ADONAI* your God is with you wherever you go."

This was a situation where Joshua and the Israelites were about to face a military enemy, and God reminded Joshua that he needed to be "strong and very bold" – not militarily (although he needed that too), but in following the commandments of *Torah*. He was not to be afraid because, so long as he followed the *Torah*, God would be with him. Had Joshua doubted God, he could not have had the courage he needed to face the enemy. But he did believe God, so the courage of his convictions allowed him to lead his men into battle and prevail.

We find another example of military courage born of biblical conviction in the famous story of David and Goliath. In 1Samuel 17:33-37 we read:

"Sha'ul said to David, "You can't go to fight this P'lishti [this Philistine]- you're just a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth!" David answered Sha'ul, "Your servant used to guard his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear would come and grab a lamb from the flock, I would go after it, hit it, and snatch the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned on me, I would catch it by the jaw, smack it and kill it. Your servant has defeated both lions and bears, and this uncircumcised P'lishti will be like one of them, because he has challenged the armies of the living God." Then David said, "*ADONAI*, who rescued me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will rescue me from the paw of this P'lishti!"

Of course we know how that turned out – David won over Goliath because he had the courage of his convictions.

Not all examples of such courage have to do with *military* enemies. Just as dangerous are evil men – opponents of God who have power, and abuse their power. Such was the case of N'vukhadnetzar, the king of Babylon. It was reported to him that three young Israelites, Shadrakh, Meishakh and 'Aved-N'go, refused to bow down to his god. So he had them brought before him and said to them:

"All right, then. If you are prepared, when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, harp, zither, lute, bagpipe and the rest of the musical instruments, to fall down and worship the gold statue, very well. But if you won't worship, you will immediately be thrown into a blazing hot furnace- and what god will save you from my power then?" Shadrakh, Meishakh and 'Aved-N'go answered the king, "Your question doesn't require an answer from us. Your majesty, if our God, whom we serve, is able to save us, he will save us from the blazing hot furnace and from your power. But even if he doesn't, we want you to know, your majesty, that we will neither serve your gods nor worship the gold statue which you have set up." (Daniel 3:15-18).

So into the furnace they went! And were they made toast? No, they were not! Because they had courage that matched their convictions, God brought them through the fiery furnace unscathed.

And a favorite of mine is the story of Esther. In the Book of the Bible named after her, there is a back-and-forth conversation going on between her and her cousin Mordekhai – her from inside

the king's palace, and Mordechai from outside. Mordechai sent a message to Esther (through an intermediary) informing her that the king had issued a decree to kill all the Jews in the kingdom, and he implored her to intercede with the king on the Jews' behalf. At first she is afraid, and sent back this reply:

"All the king's officials, as well as the people in the royal provinces, know that if anyone, man or woman, approaches the king in the inner courtyard without being summoned, there is just one law- he must be put to death- unless the king holds out the gold scepter for him to remain alive; and I haven't been summoned to the king for the past thirty days." (Esther 4:11).

But Mordechai responded:

"Don't suppose that merely because you happen to be in the royal palace you will escape any more than the other Jews. For if you fail to speak up now, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from a different direction; but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows whether you didn't come into your royal position precisely for such a time as this." (Esther 4:13-14).

This last comment of Mordechai's is a clear indication that he believed God knew in advance that this would happen, and intentionally placed Esther in her position of influence so that she could help. Upon hearing it, Esther summoned the courage of her convictions and replied:

"Go, assemble all the Jews to be found in Shushan, and have them fast for me, neither eating nor drinking for three days, night and day; also I and the girls attending me will fast the same way. Then I will go in to the king, which is against the law; and if I perish, I perish." (Esther 4:16).

Well, we know that she did not perish and, in fact, is recorded in the Bible as a heroine for saving her people. Why? Because God gave her courage to act on her convictions.

But things do not always turn out that favorably, like for Stephen, whose courage of convictions resulted in his being stoned. We read in Acts 7 how he was chastising and calling a crowd of Jewish men to repentance; try and imagine the reception he received when the crowd heard him say this:

"Stiffnecked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You continually oppose the *Ruach HaKodesh*! You do the same things your fathers did! Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who told in advance about the coming of the *Tzaddik* [the Righteous One], and now you have become his betrayers and murderers! - you! - who receive the *Torah* as having been delivered by angels- but do not keep it!" (Acts 7:51-52)

"At this, they began yelling at the top of their voices, so that they wouldn't have to hear him; and with one accord, they rushed at him, threw him outside the city and began stoning him. And the witnesses laid down their coats at the feet of a young man named Sha'ul. As they

were stoning him, Stephen called out to God, "Lord Yeshua! Receive my spirit!" Then he kneeled down and shouted out, "Lord! Don't hold this sin against them!" With that, he died;" (Acts 7:57-60).

When we read stories about such people – martyrs for the faith we call them – we often shrink back from thinking of ourselves as one day being in their shoes because, deep down, we suspect that we are not spiritually ready to do similarly, and we are afraid. So we put them on a pedestal as being "super humans" and fool ourselves into thinking that we will never have to follow their examples. We tell ourselves: "I'll never be called to do such things – endure persecution, personal loss, and even death for the Lord." The problem is that Scripture says otherwise – Scriptures like Luke 9:23-24, in which Yeshua tells us:

"If anyone wants to come after me, let him say 'No' to himself, take up his execution-stake daily and keep following me. For whoever tries to save his own life will destroy it, but whoever destroys his life on my account will save it."

Or John 15:20:

"Remember what I told you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you too;"

Or 2 Timothy 3:12:

"And indeed, all who want to live a godly life united with the Messiah Yeshua will be persecuted,."

If we do not take these Scriptures and others like them seriously as applying to us, we are, in effect, saying to God: "No, I do not have the courage of my convictions and, what's more, if I have to face trials that require such courage, I would rather give up my convictions."

Because we live in the Western World and especially in the United States, most of us will never have to face physical torture for our faith. Not so in the Middle East, the Orient, and the Third World. But let's, for a moment talk about our situation. How are we called to act courageously on our convictions? Well, let's just look around! There is unbelief and ungodliness everywhere, beckoning to us – "Come join us," it is saying. "Life is easier with us. Life is safer with us. Your biblical principles are old fashioned. There is no God and, if there were, wouldn't He want the best for you? Come with us! Be safe!"

Most of us have heard that voice at one time or another, and some of us remember occasions when we have given in to it. It speaks to us when our supervisor at work "asks" something of us that is unethical, and when our friend or associate urges that we join him in some kind of inappropriate conduct. In the case of our employer – saying "no" to him or her could have consequences for our advancement at our job because employers have power over us in the workplace. In the case of refusing to go along with our friend's inappropriate invitation – that could have social consequences – perhaps we will be typed "holier than thou" and ostracized. The first case is an example of positional power, and the second is an example of social power.

Both fall far short of the extreme situations of martyrdom that we read about in Scripture, but the principle is the same. We are confronted by a choice of doing right or wrong, and we are tempted to do what is wrong because fear wells up within us, and we want to avoid consequences. In both cases, there are two questions before us: (1) "Do we have convictions?" and (2) "Do we have the courage of our convictions?"

1 Corinthians 10:13 makes a promise that should offer us some solace, for it states:

"No temptation has seized you beyond what people normally experience, and God can be trusted not to allow you to be tempted beyond what you can bear. On the contrary, along with the temptation he will also provide the way out, so that you will be able to endure."

I know that some of us are aware of this Scripture, and I want to make sure that we don't misinterpret it. The way out that the Scripture promises is not necessarily one that we would choose for ourselves. Stephen's way out was to die for having the courage of his convictions and, as you can see by what he cried out with his last breath, he was indeed given the capacity to endure it.

Our way out of a moral dilemma that we are one day faced with could be that final – we cannot discount the possibility – but, if it is less, it will be no less meaningful, and perhaps no less painful. Our godly way out of a temptation that threatens to compromise our convictions may have to include being demoted in a job or losing it; perhaps being downgraded by a teacher unjustly; perhaps being refused a loan without cause. It may result in our losing money, losing friends, enduring gross inconvenience, or any number of other unpleasant results. Painful as they may be, we are, nevertheless, promised that God will give us the capacity to endure them if we exercise the courage of our godly convictions.

Romans 8:28: "Furthermore, we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called in accordance with his purpose;"

Many of us have experienced this phenomenon in our own lives. We become sick and are hospitalized – that's bad! However, in the course of our hospitalization, we encounter patients and staff that profit by our ministry as a result of our being there – that's good! We are laid off from our job – that's bad. But when we are re-hired, it is in a job that better suits us, and we have more influence – that's good! As for biblical examples, I'm thinking of how Joseph was accosted by his brothers and sold into slavery – that was very bad! But because of that happening, Joseph became a powerful ruler in Egypt, and got to save his family, the future Jewish people – that was very good! And of course, the prime example is Yeshua Himself who was persecuted, arrested, tried, convicted, and executed merely for who He was – that was very, very, bad! However, because he had the courage of his convictions and embraced His destiny to the glory of God, salvation came to the world – very, very, good!!

So, let's summarize. We are called to have convictions – biblical ones – and then to act on our convictions with courage provided by the Holy Spirit. It would be a mistake to rely on mere natural courage, because then, all the evil one has to do is increase the temptations set before us until our human courage fails. Also, we should be willing to conform our lives to the heroes we

read about in the Bible - heroes who embraced their roles as living sacrifices in their service to God, the prime example of whom was Yeshua.

Finally, I want to leave you with what I think is the clearest statement in the Bible of a person who, without question, had the courage of his convictions and is worthy of our emulating. In Acts 20:22-24, in his farewell to the elders at Ephesus, the Apostle Paul said to them:

".. Now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Yerushalayim. I don't know what will happen to me there, other than that, in every city, the *Ruach HaKodesh* keeps warning me that imprisonment and persecution await me. But I consider my own life of no importance to me whatsoever, as long as I can finish the course ahead of me, the task I received from the Lord Yeshua- to declare in depth the Good News of God's love and kindness."

I now end this message as I began, and please join with me in declaring:

**"Be strong! Be strong! And may we be strengthened!"**  
***Chazak! Chazak! V'nit-chazeik!***