



**"A STRONG HAND
AND AN
OUTSTRETCHED ARM"**



**PASSOVER
2026**



"A STRONG HAND AND AN OUTSTRETCHED ARM"

To be read after the Four Questions

So much has happened in the world since we last gathered for a Seder. The last Israeli hostages have returned home. Israel has embarked on not one but two wars with Iran. In the United States, division over Israel and unmasked antisemitism have surfaced in both major political parties. And all of that is only global news. In our own lives, we may have experienced joys and pains, highs and lows, celebrations and days of sadness. As we gather now at the Seder, we take stock of how far we have come on our journeys toward personal freedom this past year, and how far we still have to go.

As we begin to recite the Passover story, we intone a familiar refrain:

עבדים היינו לפרעה במצרים, ויציאנו ה' אלהינו משם ביד חזקה ובזרע נטויה

We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and the LORD our God brought us out from there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm.

The words function as a comfort to us, reminding us that God helped us in our darkest days in the past, and will be there for us in the future. But what exactly does "a strong hand and an outstretched arm" mean? Is this merely poetry, or perhaps a reminder to us to strive toward something more?

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Text 1: The Haggadah Itself

From the Magid Section of the Haggadah

"With a strong hand." This is the pestilence, as it is said: "Behold, the hand of the LORD shall be on your cattle in the field, on the horses, the donkeys, the camels, on the herd and on the flock, a very strong plague." (Exodus 9:3)

בְּיַד חֲזָקָה. זֶה הַדָּבָר, כְּמָה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: הִנֵּה יַד ה' הוֹיָה בְּמִקְנֶךָ אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׂדֶה, בַּסּוּסִים, בַּחֲמָרִים, בַּגְּמָלִים, בַּבָּקָר וּבַצֹּאן, דָּבָר כָּבֵד מְאֹד

"And an outstretched arm." This is the sword, as it is said "And God's sword was drawn in God's hand, outstretched over Jerusalem." (1 Chronicles 21:16)

וּבְזֶרַע נְטוּיָה. זֶה הַחֶרֶב, כְּמָה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: וַחֲרַב שְׁלֹפָה בְּיָדוֹ, נְטוּיָה עַל-יְרוּשָׁלַיִם

Questions for Discussion:

1. This approach is a classic exegetical or midrashic approach to understanding the Bible, by drawing upon the same language used elsewhere to seek understanding of an ambiguous or troubling text. What about this specific text might have troubled the rabbis leading them to offer this explanation?
2. If you were asked to explain the expression, how would you choose to explain it?



Text 2: Ancient Comparisons: The Arm of God Versus the Arm of Pharaoh in the Exodus Narratives

James K Hoffmeier, Biblica, Vol 67. No. 3

In his article for the scholarly magazine *Biblica*, Dr. James Hoffmeier notes that many older Egyptian inscriptions used the imagery of a "strong" or "mighty" hand that eventually become attributes of God in the Exodus narrative. He speculates on why the Bible uses these Egyptian phrases.

The evidence presented here leads us to suggest several observations about the use of [*yad chazakah*] and [*zeroah netuyah*]. First, the writer(s) of the exodus material (and the reminiscences, e.g. the Deuteronomy references) were familiar with Egyptian expressions and appropriated them... Our second and third observations have to do with why the biblical writers chose to use the expressions [*yad chazakah*] and [*zeroah netuyah*]. The foregoing references illustrate that the Pharaohs, especially those of the New Kingdom, recognized that their power to conquer, subdue, hunt, etc. was linked to their mighty arms. One cannot help but wonder if the biblical writers were not consciously using expressions like [*yad chazakah*] and [*zeroah netuyah*] polemically against the Egyptian concepts that were embodied in Pharaoh.... What better way for the exodus traditions to describe God's victory over Pharaoh, and as a result his superiority, than to use Hebrew derivations or counterparts to Egyptian expressions that symbolized Egyptian royal power. The drama of the exodus narratives in describing the struggle between God and Pharaoh's arms is heightened when it is realized that the arm of the Egyptian king was thought to be infused with strength of the supreme god Amun, or the war gods Seth or Montu. The polemical and legitimizing value of these expressions, which appear to go hand in hand, would have had special significance for the reader or hearer of the exodus narratives. By extending his victorious arm, God showed his superiority over Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Why do you think the authors of the Haggadah would apply a phrase that Egyptian pharaohs used to describe God?
2. What do you think the defeat of the Egyptian empire by God is meant to symbolize?



Text 3: The "Push" and the "Potential"

Rabbi Channan Morrison, Silver in the Land of Israel, an adaptation of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook's Olat Re'iyah

If the objective of the Exodus had been only to liberate the Israelites and raise them to the level of other free nations of the world, then no special Divine intervention would have been necessary. By the usual laws of nature and history, the Jewish people would have gradually progressed to a level of culture and morality prevalent among nations.

However, God wanted the newly freed slaves to swiftly attain a high moral and spiritual plane. In order to prepare them for their unique destiny, they required God's "strong hand." This metaphor implies a forceful intervention that neutralized the natural forces of the universe. God's 'strong hand' dramatically raised the Jewish people from the depths of defilement and degradation in Egypt to the spiritual heights of Sinai.

The "outstretched arm," on the other hand, implies an unrealized potential, a work in progress. The Hebrew word for "arm" is *zero'a*, from the root *zera* (seed), indicating future growth. Even today, the ultimate goal of the Exodus has still not been fully achieved. The process of perfecting and redeeming the Jewish people is one of gradual progression.

While the "strong hand" gave the initial push, it is through the "outstretched arm" that we steadily advance toward our final goal.

Seder Activity:

Going around the table, describe a "push" you received that is enabling you to pursue a long-term goal. Explain why that goal is important to you.



Text 4: Speaking Torah: With Strong Hands and Outstretched Arms

Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld

www.jewishboston.com

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Significantly, God—the God who redeems us from Egypt with a “strong hand and an outstretched arm”—tells Moses to stretch forth his own arm and tell the people to go forward [at the Red Sea]. Why does Moses have to stretch forth his arm? Surely, it is not because he himself possesses magical or supernatural powers; we know it is God, not Moses, who must split the sea.

Moses must stretch forth his arm because, ultimately, the outstretched arm is the response to the human cry. If the cry is one way of reaching out across the chasm between us, the outstretched arm is another. This is what liberation requires, this is what will enable the people to move forward, this is what will transform the waters of despair into the waters of redemption.

This is the greatness of the daughter of Pharaoh, whose compassion earns her the name Batyah, daughter of God. According to a midrash in the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Megillah, the arm of Pharaoh’s daughter “miraculously stretched to sixty amot when she extended her hand to reach for the baby Moses as he lay in a basket in the Nile River.” We are told that Pharaoh’s daughter saw the baby and heard him crying. Her compassion miraculously extends across the vast distances of class and nationality and religion that separate her from the Hebrew child. She is called the daughter of God because she acts in the image of God—extending a strong hand and an outstretched arm to protect this crying infant, the very embodiment of human vulnerability.

The real-life process of liberation requires no less than this: that we reach out again and again, in spite of the great risks, in spite of the inevitable disappointments—that we reach out to each other, again and again, with strong hands and outstretched arms.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What does it mean to imitate God by finding our own places to demonstrate strong hands and outstretched arms?
2. What is one way you might hope to have a strong hand and an outstretched arm in the coming year?

