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Angel for Shabbat: Matot/Masei

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Many years ago, my beloved teacher Rabbi Meyer Simcha Feldblum gave me advice based on a rabbinic teaching. That advice continues to be relevant.

The Talmud cites the opinion of Rabbi Nathan, who taught: when the priest ground the incense in the Temple, the one superintending would say: “grind it very fine, very fine grind it,” because the voice is good for preparing the spices. The question is: what does a voice have to do with grinding spices? The answer: when the priest is grinding the spices, he may not feel that he is making any progress. It seems like rote work that does not improve the spices. A voice of encouragement reminds the priest: you are making progress, your work is not in vain. Keep grinding, you will see positive results from your labors.

The lesson goes beyond the priest grinding spices. It relates to all of us. We work hard to advance our lives and our ideas and ideals; but it often can feel frustrating. No matter how hard we labor, it often seems that we are not making real progress. We can come to feel that our efforts are futile and unproductive. But then someone comes along and says: hazak uvarukh, you are doing something important, you have impacted positively on us. The voice is good! The words of encouragement re-energize us; we go back to our “grinding” work with a new feeling of purpose. Our work isn’t in vain after all.

Words of encouragement have a profound impact. When positive words are accompanied by supportive and loving actions, then we have ingredients for happiness and progress. Critics and fault-finders are readily available. But genuine friends and supporters are the ones who validate and enhance life.

Just as we need to hear voices of encouragement for our own strivings, we also need to be the voices of encouragement to those who are doing good and important work. Just as a nasty comment can undermine someone’s feeling of self-worth, so a positive comment can provide the encouragement a person needs to move ahead in a positive way.

This week's Torah reading brings us to the end of the book of Bemidbar. It is customary in many congregations for congregants to call out at the conclusion of the Parasha: Hazak ve-nit-hazak, Be strong, and let us strengthen ourselves. As we’ve reached this milestone, may we merit to continue onward in our studies and in our lives. This communal custom is a way to demonstrate solidarity with others, to encourage all of us to be strong and determined to move forward.

Unfortunately, our world has no shortage of people—Jews as well as non-Jews—who cast aspersions on the Jewish People, on the Jewish Homeland, on Jewish ideas and ideals. To the nay-sayers, we reply proudly and confidently: hazak ve-nit-hazak, we are strong and we will strengthen each other. We will keep working faithfully and steadily for the values that we cherish. We will not be discouraged. We will be strong...and we will strengthen others.