

## **HA-AZINU**

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Shabbat Shalom.

A couple of weeks ago, Cynthia asked me if I'd do the drash for this week because the person who originally was going to do it decided not to. I said yes. At that time I didn't know that my mother's yahrzeit would be tomorrow. So I want to dedicate this drash to her, a sweet mom who taught her 3 children to value empathy, deplore racism and ethnocentrism, and to be proud Jews.

When I read the parasha after Cynthia told me which one it was, I thought it looked interesting. However, I didn't know what I was signing up for. This week I read it closely, at least 5 times, maybe more. I found the English translation beautiful, but what did it mean? I also read Robert Alter's translation and commentary, and learned a lot, but I still had the same question. What is this parasha about?

The more I dug into it, the more I read it, the more I felt as if I needed to read the Torah from Leviticus through Deuteronomy, and the more I felt as if I ought to consult Rashi, Maimonides, the Talmud, Torah scholars and Bible

historians. I did none of that. Besides, I didn't want to quote a whole slew of other people. This isn't an academic treatise.

It occurred to me that Ha'azinu summarizes the three previous parshiyot that take place before the Israelites enter and settle the Promised Land after 40 years of nomadic life. These 3 parshiyot start with Ki-Tavo, where, at first, God threatens curses at the people of Israel if, when they enter the Promised Land, they don't abide by His commandments. This is followed by blessings if they do follow his commandments, after which He threatens them again with horrifying curses in case their future behavior in the Promised Land does not uphold God's Teachings. At the end of Ki-Tavo, Moses tells the people to observe the terms of the covenant with God so that they will succeed and not suffer the consequences of God's frightening curses.

In the following parasha, Nitzavim, Moses reminds the people of the covenant and warns them about turning away from God and worshipping other gods, which will result in the curses outlined in Ki-Tavo. However, if they return to God and do *tshuva*, God will bless them and curse their enemies.

In Va-Yeilekh, the parasha after Nitzavim and before Ha-azinu, God tells Moses that he will die and not enter the Promised Land, that his people will forsake the covenant and worship other gods, and that many evils will befall them because God will hide his countenance from them. God commands

Moses to write down a poem - called התורה דברי - “Words of the Torah” - and teach it to all the men, women, children and strangers in the communities so that they will revere God and observe his Teachings. Moses records the poem and instructs the Levites to carry it in the Ark along with the Ten Commandments. The end of Va-Yeilekh tells that Moses recited the entire poem to the whole congregation of Israel - men, women, children, and strangers in the community.

I read this and imagined a biblical comedy movie, like Monty Python’s *The Life of Brian*. Visualize a 120 year-old man who lisps and who’s probably frail because he’s told by God in Va-Yeilekh and in Ha-azinu that he will soon die. There he is, reciting this poem in front of tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of Israelites and others, all standing in an open space probably in the Jordan Valley. Can’t you picture the chaos? Who could have heard him? I can hardly hear davenirs in our enclosed sanctuary here when they don’t use a mic or the mic doesn’t work. Anyway, I digress.

Ha-azinu is the poem Moses read to the people.

In the beginning of the parasha, Moses appeals to God in the heavens and the people on earth to listen to him. The lines he speaks are so stunning that I’d like you to open Etz Hayim to page 1185 and look at the words as I read them:

Give ear, O heavens, let me speak;  
Let the earth hear the words I utter!  
May my discourse come down as the rain,  
My speech distill as the dew,  
Like showers on young growth,  
Like droplets on the grass.  
For the name of the Lord I proclaim;  
Give glory to our God! [Raise my arms like a Baptist minister]

Isn't this just beautiful?

Doesn't Moses sound here like an Evangelical preacher?

(Pause)

Can I get a hallelujah?

Then Moses talks about God and what God had done for the people, what God said, and what God threatened to do.

In Ha-azinu , as in Ki-Tavo, God foretells what will happen to the Israelites if they abandon His Teachings and worship other gods when they settle in the Promised Land. In Ha-azinu, as in the three previous parshiyot, God admonishes the Jewish people by predicting their future as not adhering to his commandments in the Torah. God's words in Ha-azinu are similar to the

words of the prophets who lived approximately a thousand years later, during the time of the first Temple and after its destruction in 586 BCE, when they, too, admonish the Jewish people, this time for having abandoned God's Teachings.

What are these Teachings that both God and the Prophets castigate the people for abandoning?

I would venture that these Teachings are the moral foundations of Judaism, not the rituals and practices that make up our religion. These are the Teachings that have to do with human behavior in creating a just society and with caring for God's creation - the Earth and all that's on it. These Teachings include feeding the hungry, caring for the poor, widows and orphans, and the most-repeated phrase in the Torah - "Welcome the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." The Teachings also have to do with caring for the Earth, such as the commandments of the *shmita* year, leaving the earth fallow every 7 years to replenish the soil. And in my opinion the most significant commandment is: "Justice, justice shall you pursue..." (Deuteronomy 16:20).

These commandments - or Teachings or Torah - are as important and relevant today as they were from the time of Moses to the times of the prophets - or maybe even more so now, because our world is falling apart,

socially, politically, economically, and physically. How can we, as Jewish Americans, uphold our Jewish values while facing or confronting a government that is morphing from democracy into autocracy? How can we pursue justice when 6 of our Supreme Court justices buttress our autocratic leader? How can we approve Israel's policies in Gaza which are causing starvation and homelessness, and in the West Bank where justice doesn't exist under military occupation? What can we do to quell the perils of climate change when our current government thinks it's a hoax? How can we welcome the stranger when our government is expelling so many of them in horrifying ways?

Our world is falling apart because of human behavior of selfishness, ignorance, fear, and lack of empathy, all of which are responsible for many of the problems people face, whether they lived during the time of Moses or now, and whether they are here in the US or in Israel or anywhere else on this planet.

Two days ago we repented our communal sins, all of which are sins of behavior, some of which God condemns in the parshiyot from Ki-Tavo to Ha-azinu. We, our little community here at Netivot Shalom, are not selfish, not ignorant and have empathy for others. We are a community that values Tikkun Olam, and many of us try our best to observe the teachings of the Torah that Hillel summed up: "Do not do unto others what you do not want

others to do unto you.” If the ancient Israelites and people now lived by that maxim, the parshiyot from Ki-Tavo to Ha-azinu might have been quite different, and so might our world today.

Shana Tova.