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D'var Torah: Friday, September 25, 2009

Shabbat Shuvah, "Ha'azinu," Deuteronomy: Chapter 32:1-52

Congregation Or Chadash, Chicago, Illinois

### **In Search of *Tekiyah***

I was dumbfounded to see that the parasha for this week, "Ha'azinu," is comprised mainly of poetry. (Some readers of the Torah also refer to this parasha as the Song of Moses or *Shirat Ha'azinu*, it is one of two songs or poems in the entire Torah.) When I asked Rabbi Larry if I had the right portion for this evening, he wrote back: "Ah yes, "Ha'azinu," short but difficult (because it's poetry). Always read on Shabbat Shuvah."

Just a couple of points about the actual poetry: there are 43 verses of poetry in this portion. Rabbi Andrea Weiss, in *The Torah, A Women's Commentary*, explains that these verses have the defining features of biblical poetry: elevated diction; repetition and patterning; and parallel lines that mirror each other, with two, sometimes three lines (separated by a colon) that echo each other's sentiments or express a continuous idea. This structure speaks to the larger meaning of the poem; in the rules of grammar that we once tried to learn, colons indicate a very close relationship.

The opening lines of "Ha'azinu" are: "Give ear, O heavens, let me speak: Let the earth hear the words I utter!" According to Rabbi Weiss, this parasha is a foretelling of future events for Israel. (Biblical historians are uncertain of the true authorship and age of "Ha'azinu," but they think it was probably written before the destruction of the southern kingdom of Judah.) Moses recites these verses, which recount a brief history of God's early relationship with Israel, when God had established a special relationship with the people and watched over them with love. But they begin to reject God and turn to other deities. God accuses them of insubordination and idolatry and proposes a punishment, then reconsiders it. Although God became enraged and wanted to destroy Israel, He realized that other nations might misinterpret Israel's demise as the result of their own power rather than as a divine punishment. At the end of "Ha'azinu," verses 44-52, Moses finishes reciting his lines and charges the people to diligently follow the Torah, and then God gives instructions to Moses for his death. Moses will view the Promised Land from a distance but will not enter it.

Why *is* most of this parasha in the form of poetry? In the previous parasha, "Vayeilech," God predicts that after Moses dies, the people will go astray. He asks Moses to write this particular poem and teach it to the people, as it will serve as a witness and testify to God's justice in the face of Israel's "wayward behavior." (P. 1251)

For Rabbi Weiss, this parasha tells of a relationship gone awry. The poem portrays

"A faithful God, never false,/True and upright indeed

Unworthy children—/That crooked, perverse generation—  
Their baseness had played God false.”

It asks: “Is not this the Father who created you —/fashioned you and made you endure?”

Other lines attest to God watching over the people and guarding them “as the pupil of God’s eye,/nursing them with honey from the crag.” But how do the people behave? They neglect and forsake God for other deities.

So, God needed these people of Israel to return his love, to befriend and care for Him as He had done for them. It’s difficult to remember that this is supposed to be a reciprocal relationship. It is a partnership. In *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, Adin Steinsaltz, a scholar of Jewish mysticism, explains this in a very profound way:

“Throughout life, one asks the same question in many forms. This question lies at the heart of a search for oneself ... For every human being it varies. ... But one never really extricates oneself from the context of the issue, Who am I? And from its corollaries: Where do I come from? Where am I going? What for?” (P. 139)

For Steinsaltz, these questions are really one question, the question of the self that we confront ourselves with when we are alone, even if we are in a family, a community, a nation, even if we feel at home in the world. The question of self — Who am I? Where am I? — is resolved when a person realizes that it is the other side of the question that God asks of us: Where are you? This is the response to despair, he writes. The Other Voice is asking the same question.

“When a man learns that just as he broods over himself so does God yearn for him and look for him, he is at the beginning of a higher level of consciousness.... For in truth it is not one question with two sides but a meeting place of two questions, that of man seeking himself and of God seeking man. Together they can approach a solution of the problem of man’s existence. And in the search for this solution, ... this going after God, a man will rediscover himself as well as the definition of his own particular being.” (Pages 148-149)

When Moses finished reciting the words of the poem, he tells the people to take his words to heart. In verse 47, he says: “For this is not a trifling thing for you: it is your very life; through it you shall long endure...” (P.1263) *Not a trifling thing*. Consider your own relationship with God. How would you characterize it? Has it ever gone awry?

If you have trouble with this more traditional image of God, then understand it perhaps as your best or highest self, the *yezter hatov*, the inner impulse to do good. How do you refresh or re-cultivate a relationship with God? Can you steer yourself toward the right or left hand you might need to make to invite a dialogue with or allow room for a force you could imagine as God?

How *did* we engage this year with our idea of God? Did we initiate any kind of communication or exchange; did we have a dream or a meditation; did we keep a journal; did we attend a service in a mindful way? Did we seek the calm and clarity of silence, as Stephanie spoke about in her D'var last Saturday? Did we find ourselves chanting a few lines from the Saturday morning service on our way to work, if only to handle a million anxious thoughts?

Or is our challenge even deeper, even more basic, the one at the truly gut-wrenching, day-by-day level: Did we simply lack faith this past year that whatever happened, we would be able to cope or survive or manage things, manage circumstances or feelings that we dreaded or that haunted us?

One's life, say many Jewish thinkers, is always about relationships. The commentaries and the liturgy of the prayerbook *Kol Haneshamah* make that very clear, and especially in regard to God. The words Return again/*hashivenu*; Unetannah tokef kedushat hayom, and *Avinu Malkeinu* could bring you to the majesty of whatever you think God is. Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his writings, reminds us that the Torah sets aside "special days when ordinary concerns are transcended so that our souls are free to concentrate on the eternal, even as a married couple clears a day to mark their wedding anniversary, to recapture the way they felt about each other..." (P.87) While this marriage analogy is a little overwhelming, it aligns with his assertion that the High Holy Days serve as a sanctuary in time.

And this evening is included in that sanctuary. It is Shabbat Shuvah, meaning the "Sabbath of Return," the Sabbath between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. We have heard *tekiyah*, *shevarim*, and *teruah* a week ago and will hear them again. Rabbi Larry talked about the idea of a year in which one could experience real change, in which one has arrived again at point of embarkation. I believe Yehuda will also speak about self-examination and moving forward in his talk on Kol Nidre.

With all of that in mind, there may be no better time than now, the Days of Awe, to practice *tekiyah*, to walk in some new direction, to find one's way toward emotional wholeness. There may be no better time than now to express yourself, to befriend a shattered piece of your own *shevarim* or *teruah*, to say to God or to your own soul or to someone who badly needs to hear it: *thank you* or *I appreciate you* or *let's clear the air* or *I am sorry I have not been more attentive to you*. There may be no better time than now to say *I do love you*, or something even harder than that: *I still love you*.

Thank you, and Shabbat Shalom.