

Ha'azinu 5777

Parashat Ha'azinu presents us once again with a singing Moses. This time, though, the tone is infinitely more serious, more measured, than the song we heard in parashat *Beshallah*. Moses is no longer singing for joy: instead, this song is a warning. When Israel forsakes God, as the people inevitably will, rewarding God's faithful care with insolent infidelity, God will become incensed, feed them poisoned wine and mock the false gods in whom they trusted. God will then pass judgment on them. It isn't entirely clear to me what happens to Israel then, but in what feels like a rather rushed, maybe even tacked-on ending, we find God executing judgment on all Israel's foes. Sober stuff.

Not only that, but this time Moses is not singing off the cuff - on the contrary, he has been explicitly commanded to give voice to the first 43 verses of Ha'azinu. The instruction is found in the parasha we read last week, and digests down to this:

The Lord said to Moses: You are soon to lie with your fathers. This people will thereupon go astray after the alien gods in their midst, in the land they are about to enter; they will forsake me and break their covenant that I made with them...Therefore write down this song and teach it to the people of Israel; put it in their mouths in order that this song may be my witness against the people of Israel. When...they eat their fill and grow fat and turn to other gods and serve them, spurning Me and breaking my covenant, and the many evils and troubles befall them - then this song shall confront them as a witness, since it will never be lost from the mouth of their offspring...That day, Moses wrote down this song and taught it to the Israelites.

So Moses will die and everything will go wrong, but the Song is somehow to be found on the Israelites' hard drive, so that when the inevitable happens and they once again fall short of expectations, what Moses has taught them will somehow spring to mind and 'confront' them, bearing witness to how far they have fallen short of expectations.

But hold on a minute. The average Israelite has surely by now got the message that going after alien gods is - how shall I put this - not in the

top five ways of getting ahead? All the way through the Torah, ever since the exodus, and during the book of *Devarim* in particular, this message has been hammered home with brutal force on multiple occasions. Only a few weeks ago we re-read the *tochacha*, the graphically awful description of how life will fall apart if the *mitzvot* are not kept.

So what does this particular song have to add? We need to take a closer look to find out.

A few initial observations. First, if we open the Torah and look at the text, we can instantly identify the Song - it is written in two stark columns, right and left margins of each strictly justified, a unique typesetting. The words of the charge march soberly down the parchment two by two, the visual pattern echoing the stringency of the content.

Second, the Song contains two of those lovely Torah one-offs - a large letter *heh* introducing verse 32:6, and an extra small *yud* at the end of the word *teshi* in 32:18.

Third, the Song has no introduction - Moses just launches straight into it. No, actually, that's not quite true - it does have an introduction, we read it last week, it's the final verse of *vayelekh*. In other words, we have been hanging on a knife-edge for a whole week waiting to hear what Moses is going to sing.

So there are various markers which prompt us to expect something out of the ordinary.

And I think we get it. I think Moses gives us the key early on. In verse 4, and we find something else which is unique in Torah: the description of God as a *tzur*, or rock. *Hatzur* - Moses declares, directly after the introduction is over - *tamim po'alo* - "The Rock, his work has complete integrity." The image of God as a *tzur* is repeated again in verse 18 - *tzur yeladecha teshi* "you were unmindful of the Rock which bore you", and the word occurs two further times in the Song, as well. I want to suggest that this is not coincidental - we have already noticed the rigor with which the Song is composed.

The commentators notice it, too. Rashi's view is that the 'rocky' language suggests that God is not capricious - that God, as *tzur*, operates '*badin*' = with reasoned jmt. Ibn Ezra understands *tzur* to mean that God is steadfast, eternally existent, and Sforno agrees with him; Ramban says that *tzur* indicates the trait (*midah*) of strict judgment. All of these seem to be based on their immediate context, the sombre and uncompromising tone of the Song, reinforcing the woes that are to come when Israel goes wrong, as it inevitably will.

But what is Moses thinking when he says '*tzur*'? Well, it's tempting to think that Moses has rocks on the brain. Indeed, at the end of the chapter, we find God once again reminding Moses why he cannot enter the land - we remember, that was an incident directly tied to a rock, one which Moses hit in preference to speaking to it. But the word used there is '*sela*' - that's different. **ALTHOUGH THE PARALLEL TEXT IN EXODUS 17 HAS TZUR**

No: when Moses says *tzur* I think he is remembering another moment entirely. He's remembering the moment that he *doesn't* tell us about in Devarim, though he faithfully retells just about everything else. Think back to the Golden Calf and Moses' impassioned request to see God's face. '*El rahum vehanun*', he pleads, 'show me Your glory'. And instead, God asks him to stand upon the rock - the *tzur* - and explains that God will put Moses in the cleft of the *tzur* as he passes, showing him only God's back.

Here is the new lesson of the Song. Moses is telling us - in poetry - about his own relationship with God, that perhaps is echoed in our own. *Tzur* is code for a reaching out to God with no assurance of reply. We ask for an audience, but instead all we see is God's back. As much as we seek God's presence - as much as we sought it over the past two weeks - we cannot be confident it will be revealed. Perhaps, if we are very lucky, God will pass us by, as he passed by Moses - but we will never be entirely assured of a happy ending. Our actions will continue to have consequences. Somehow we need to find a way to live with the prophecy that things will go horribly wrong.

But look again. It is God who placed Moses safe in the cleft of the *tzur*. It is Godself passing by in glory. True, Moses cannot see God's face - but he does see God's back, the part which the tradition understands to be the knot of God's *tefillin* - and then, once again, he rolls up his sleeves and goes about his work. There may not be an ending, but there is a resolution. Somehow there is a strange comfort in the indirectness, a safe place in all that unyielding environment. *Hinei makom iti* says God - look, there is a place *with* me.

Ha'azinu - listen! - says Moses to us. It is hard, so hard, to be in relationship with God. It's going to be tough, like it was for me. You will never feel secure. Things will go wrong. It will feel unfair and disproportionate, sometimes. There will be distance, there will be pain. But you need to remember this Song - you need to remember that I told you God is a *tzur*. Rocky, unyielding, uncompromising - yes. But also a cleft, a place of refuge. And from that place of refuge - well, seeing God's back is enough.

Shabbat shalom.