Kol Rina

An Independent Minyan

Parashat Ha'Azinu

October 8, 2022 *** 13 Tishrei, 5783

Ha'Azinu in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3109/jewish/Haazinu-in-a-Nutshell.htm

The greater part of the Torah reading of Haazinu ("Listen In") consists of a 70-line "song" delivered by Moses to the people of Israel on the last day of his earthly life.

Calling heaven and earth as witnesses, Moses exhorts the people, "Remember the days of old / Consider the years of many generations / Ask your father, and he will recount it to you / Your elders, and they will tell you" how G-d "found them in a desert land," made them a people, chose them as His own, and bequeathed them a bountiful land. The song also warns against the pitfalls of plenty—"Yeshurun grew fat and kicked / You have grown fat, thick and rotund / He forsook G-d who made him / And spurned the Rock of his salvation"—and the terrible calamities that would result, which Moses describes as G-d "hiding His face." Yet in the end, he promises, G-d will avenge the blood of His servants, and be reconciled with His people and land.

The Parshah concludes with G-d's instruction to Moses to ascend the summit of Mount Nebo, from which he will behold the Promised Land before dying on the mountain. "For you shall see the land opposite you; but you shall not go there, into the land which I give to the children of Israel."

Haftorah in a Nutshell: II Samuel 22:1-51

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/566262/jewish/Haftorah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's *haftorah* describes the song King David composed in his old age, echoing the weekly Torah reading, where Moses delivers his parting words to the Jewish nation in song form.

David's song expresses gratitude to G-d for saving him from all his enemies. He starts with the famous words, "The L-rd is my rock and my fortress." He goes on to describe the pain and hardships he encountered and reiterates that he always turned to G-d in his moments of distress. He recounts G-d's reaction to those who tormented him: "The Lord thundered from heaven; and the Most High gave forth His voice. And He sent out arrows and He scattered them, lightning and He discomfited them. . . I have pursued my enemies and have destroyed them; never turning back until they were consumed."

The King attributes his salvation to his uprightness in following G-d's ways: "The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands He recompensed me..."

The song ends with David's expression of thankfulness: "Therefore I will give thanks to You, O Lord, among the nations, and to Your name I will sing praises. He gives great salvation to His king, and He performs kindness to His anointed; to David and to his seed, forevermore."

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The Arc of the Moral Universe by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l
https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/haazinu/the-arc-of-the-moral-universe/

In majestic language, Moses breaks into song, investing his final testament to the Israelites with all the power and passion at his command. He begins dramatically but gently, calling heaven and earth to witness what he is about to say, sounding ironically very much like "The quality of mercy is not strained", Portia's speech in The Merchant of Venice.

> Listen, heavens, and I will speak;
> Let the earth hear the words of my mouth.
> May my teaching pour down like rain
> Let my speech fall like the dew;
> Like gentle rain on tender plants,
> Like showers upon the grasses. Deut. 32:1-2

But this is a mere prelude to the core message Moses wants to convey. It is the idea known as tzidduk haDin, vindicating God's justice. The way Moses puts it is this:

> The Rock, His work is whole,
> And all His ways are justice.
> A God of faith who does no wrong,
> Just is He, and upright. Deut. 32:4

This is a doctrine fundamental to Judaism and its understanding of evil and suffering in the world – a difficult but necessary doctrine. God is just. Why then do bad things happen?

> Did He act ruinously? No, with His children lies the fault,
> A warped and twisted generation. Deut. 32:5

God requites good with good, evil with evil. When bad things happen to us it is because we have been guilty of doing bad things ourselves. The fault lies not in our stars but ourselves.

Moving into the prophetic mode, Moses foresees what he has already predicted, even before they have crossed the Jordan and entered the land. Throughout the book of Deuteronomy he has been warning of the danger that, in their land, once the hardships of the desert and the struggles of battle have been forgotten, the people will become comfortable and complacent. They will attribute their

achievements to themselves and they will drift from their faith. When this happens they will bring disaster on themselves:

> Yeshurun grew fat and kicked –
> You became bloated, gross, coarse –
> They abandoned God who made them
> And rejected the Rock of their rescue…
> You deserted the Rock that bore you;
> You forgot the God who gave you birth. Deut. 32:15-18

This, the first use of the word Yeshurun in the Torah – from the root yashar, upright – is deliberately ironic. It underlines its prophecy that Israel, who once knew what it was to be upright, will be led astray by a combination of affluence, security and assimilation to the ways of its neighbours. It will betray the terms of the covenant, and when that happens it will find that God is no longer with it. It will discover that history is a ravening wolf. Separated from the source of its strength, it will be overpowered by its enemies. All that the nation once enjoyed will be lost. It is a stark and terrifying message.

Yet Moses is here bringing the Torah to a close with a theme that has been there from the beginning. God, Creator of the universe, made a world that is fundamentally good: the word that echoes seven times in the first chapter of Genesis. It is humans, granted freewill as God's image and likeness, who introduce evil into the world, and then suffer its consequences. Hence Moses' insistence that when trouble and tragedy appear, we should search for the cause within ourselves, and not blame God. God is upright and just. The defect is in us, His children.

This is perhaps the most difficult idea in the whole of Judaism. It is open to the simplest of objections, one that has sounded in almost every generation. If God is just, why do bad things happen to good people? This is the question asked not by sceptics and doubters, but by the very heroes of faith. We hear it in Abraham's plea, "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?" We hear it in Moses' challenge "Why have you done evil to this people?" It sounds again in Jeremiah:

> "Lord, you are always right when I dispute with You. Yet I must plead my case before You: Why are the wicked so prosperous? Why are evil people so happy?"
> Jer. 12:1

It is an argument that never ceased. It continued through the rabbinic literature. It was heard again in the kinot, the laments, prompted by the persecution of Jews in the Middle Ages. It sounds in the literature produced in the wake of the Spanish expulsion, and echoes still when we recall the Holocaust.

The Talmud says that of all the questions Moses asked God, this was the one to which God did not give an answer.[1] The simplest, deepest interpretation is given in Psalm 92, "The song of the Sabbath day." Though "the wicked spring up like grass," (Ps. 92:7) they will eventually be destroyed. The righteous, by contrast,

“flourish like a palm tree and grow tall like a cedar in Lebanon.” (Ps. 92:13) Evil wins in the short term but never in the long. The wicked are like grass, the righteous like a tree. Grass grows overnight but it takes years for a tree to reach its full height. In the long run, tyrannies are defeated. Empires decline and fall. Goodness and rightness win the final battle. As Martin Luther King Jr. said in the spirit of the Psalm: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”[2]

It is a difficult belief, this commitment to seeing justice in history under the sovereignty of God. Yet consider the alternatives. They are three. The first option is to say that there is no meaning in history whatsoever. Homo hominis lupus est, “Man is wolf to man”. As Thucydides said in the name of the Athenians: “The strong do as they want, the weak suffer what they must.” History is a Darwinian struggle to survive, and justice is no more than the name given to the will of the stronger party.

The second, about which I write in my book Not in God’s Name, is dualism, the idea that evil comes not from God but from an independent force: Satan, the Devil, the Antichrist, Lucifer, the Prince of Darkness, and the many other names given to the force that is not God but is opposed to Him and those who worship Him. This idea, which has surfaced in sectarian forms in each of the Abrahamic monotheisms, as well as in modern, secular totalitarianisms, is one of the most dangerous in all of history. It divides humanity into the unshakeably good and the irredeemably evil, giving rise to a long history of bloodshed and barbarism of the kind we see being enacted today in many parts of the world in the name of holy war against the greater and lesser Satan. This is dualism, not monotheism, and the Sages, who called it shtei reshuyot, “two powers” or “domains”[3], were right to reject it utterly.

The third, debated extensively in the rabbinic literature, is to say that justice ultimately exists in the world to come, in life after death. Yet though this is an essential element of Judaism, it is striking how relatively little Judaism had recourse to it, recognising that the central thrust of Tanach is on this world, and life before death. For it is here that we must work for justice, fairness, compassion, decency, the alleviation of poverty, and the perfection, as far as lies within our power, of society and our individual lives. Tanach almost never takes this option. God does not say to Jeremiah or Job that the answer to their question exists in heaven and they will see it as soon as they end their stay on earth. The passion for justice so characteristic of Judaism would dissipate entirely were this the only answer.

Difficult though Jewish faith is, it has had the effect throughout history of leading us to say: if bad things have happened, let us blame no one but ourselves, and let us labour to make them better. It was this that led Jews, time and again, to emerge from tragedy, shaken, scarred, limping like Jacob after his encounter with the

angel, yet resolved to begin again, to rededicate ourselves to our mission and faith, to ascribe our achievements to God and our defeats to ourselves.
I believe that out of such humility, a momentous strength is born.
[1] The full discussion can be found in Brachot 7a. [2] “Out of the Long Night,” The Gospel Messenger, February 8, 1958, p. 14. [3] Brachot 33b.

Making Every Word Count – Ha'azinu by Arnold M. Eisen
https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/making-every-word-count-2/

Ha’azinu is remarkable in two respects: what it says, and how it chooses to say it. My focus here will be the latter, but let’s note with regard to the former that in this, his final address to the Children of Israel before a set of farewell blessings, Moses reviews all of his people’s past, present, and future. He begins by calling on the God who had called Israel into being and called him to God’s service. He reminds Israel that God has chosen them and still cares for their well-being. He prophesies that despite all that God and Moses have said and done, Israel will abandon God, as they had in the past. God will punish them, as in the past, but never to the point of utter destruction. In the end, God and Israel will reconcile. Why, Moses pleads, can you not understand the simple truth that YHWH alone is God, YHWH and no other? If you accept that truth and act accordingly, God will save you from your enemies—and if not, not. Remember these words, he concludes, for they are your very life and the length of your days—whereupon, rather peremptorily, God tell Moses that his days are over. The time for his words is done. Moses must join the forebears who speak no more (Deut. 32:46-50).
Throughout the Book of Deuteronomy—the Book of Devarim, of words—Moses has strained to convey a message for which no words, including his, could possibly be adequate. He holds out a promise of a kind of Life, a way called “Mitzvah,” such as the world had never known. How can one describe that which has never been? The words we know cannot measure up to the life we do not know. What does wholeness look like? Who can describe perfect relations to other human beings and to God?
The possibility of that Life ever coming into existence has long depended on Moses’s ability to persuade his people to cross the Jordan and start living it. All he has in order to accomplish that is words. God’s many miracles have never succeeded in changing the hearts and minds of Israel for very long, if they worked at all. Moses’s striking of the rock to draw water from it—in frustrated recognition that words alone could not do the job assigned him—resulted in the punishment that now prevents him from crossing the Jordan with the people. Moses cannot show them the new Life; it does not exist yet, and in any case, he must remain on the river’s far bank. His language will stop exactly where his feet do, and language is all he has.
It should not surprise us, then, that Moses’s final plea to Israel to hear his words

takes the form of poetry, the mode in which words are both most precious and most powerful. The meter of Ha'azinu is fixed. The language is elevated and highly metaphorical. The verses often rhyme. The fact that the Torah reaches its culmination in poetry causes us to reflect on the nature and limits of even these carefully chosen words.

Like any other poet who seeks to construct a bridge between the known world, available to memory and experience, and the as-yet unknown world that exists only in his imagination, Moses falls back on simile and metaphor. He talks about that which has never been experienced by telling what it would be like. All through the book, Moses has tried to convince Israel that this unseen Life is, or could be, as real as what they have known: as real as the voice at Sinai, the manna in the wilderness, the repeated salvation from enemies or starvation. He has struggled to convince them of the reality awaiting them on the Jordan's far side by detailing in the most specific terms possible—the law—what their lives and institutions will be like there. Until now, he has employed a poetry of law. That which people everywhere can know—what happens when oxen gore oxen, debts are due, or sacrifices offered—is used to instruct Israel about a sort of Life as yet unknown to anyone.

Now, in Ha'azinu, Moses employs a poetry of nature—that which is most real, tangible, and enduring—and uses metaphors to get his listeners to feel and touch what awaits them. Heaven and earth, rain and dew, rock, honey, the fruit of the field, milk of sheep, the fat of lambs, the blood of grapes, the eagle and her young, the sun, moon, mountains, hills, sea, iron, brass, corn, wine:all the ageless contours of human existence, the basic givens that surround and ground ephemeral and variable history, are invoked to invest the non-yet-experienced with reality.

But even here, despite the wonder and gratitude that Moses's words arouse, language cannot reach its object. The words strain after a richness of reality that they cannot catch. After all, they are only words. "A poem should be palpable and mute," wrote the poet Archibald MacLeish. "Dumb … Silent … wordless … A poem should be equal to: not true … A poem should not mean / But be." Were poetry able to be that which it "should be," of course, there would be no poetry. Language which is "dumb, silent, wordless" is not language. If Israel could simply and instinctively have seen and known the possibility for themselves that Moses tries to teach—and, really seeing it, had acted to hear the words into being—there would be no need for Deuteronomy, or for the rest of Torah.

That is not life as we know it. We need the words, the metaphors, the teaching, and the law to direct hearing and behavior. And we need them repeated, again and again; the danger that repetition will dull our senses is matched by the reality that we do not listen well to what we do not want to hear. Moses's final poem brims over with frustration, disappointment, and perhaps anger. His words are intended

as a “witness against” Israel. He has warned them, has done his best to get them to listen. It is as if the nature he invokes has taken its course, despite his best attempts and God’s to have things otherwise. “Jeshurun grew fat and kicked; you grew fat and gross and coarse” (Deut. 32:15). Success will breed complacency and ingratitude, he warns. Blessed by God, Israel will come to take blessing for granted, turn to worship “no-gods,” and come to believe that “our own hand has prevailed” (v. 27). It will take disaster to bring them to their senses—or rather, to bring them to realize that there remain possibilities beyond what the senses, limited by experience, can grasp. In the end, Israel will return to these words and the behavior they bring in tow.

We read Ha’azinu this year right after Yom Kippur, a chance for reflection that we live at our best in the spaces opened by Moses’s words: loving, creating, building. This year in particular the power of words to raise or lower us is palpable. They can take us far from the simple truth, and serve the will to power rather than the works of kindness or conscience. Even so, the Torah insists, what we do can be adequate to the words Moses offered before he fell silent. One can choose blessing, goodness, Life. Now as ever we can cross narrow rivers, and begin life again on their far side. *(Arnold M. Eisen is the Chancellor Emeritus and Professor of Jewish Thought at JTS)*

Torah Within Reach: From Empty to Energized: Ha'azinu by Rabbi Aviva Richman
https://www.hadar.org/torah-collection/aviva-richmans-divrei-torah

By the Torah’s account, Ha’azinu is a song meant to testify against our wrongdoing. But the Rabbis reinterpret this song as a model for the powerful and dynamic nature of Torah as a whole, Torah that can be harsh like a storm or gentle like dew. Most importantly, we learn that there is nothing automatic about Torah’s goodness. The impact of Torah depends on the work we are willing to do as we learn it, share it, and interpret it.

As Moshe delivers his final discourse to the people, he invokes the imagery of water in the natural world:

Devarim 32:2

May my discourse come down as the rain,
My speech distill as the dew,
Like showers on young growth,
Like droplets on the grass.

This imagery becomes the basis of an extensive exploration of the pursuit of Torah in an early midrash on Devarim (Sifrei, Parashah 306). While the midrash begins with the premise that Torah is synonymous with goodness,[1] in the continuation it becomes clear that Torah can actually be damaging, or at least not good for everyone all the time:

Sifrei Devarim 306

“As the rain”: Just as rain is life for the world, so, words of Torah. But then (why not say:) Just as with rain, part of the world is happy (with it) and part, sad (e.g., One whose pit and vat is full of wine, and his vat and threshing floor is exposed to the rain, is grieved by it) so, words of Torah?

At first, the midrash associates rain with the life-giving quality of Torah. But upon further reflection, we know that rain is not unilaterally good for all people. Someone’s hard-earned stored wine or grain might be ruined by rain. By implication, Torah might also actually cause harm to some people. Indeed, in our own reflection on how people experience Torah in their lives, we might fairly arrive at the conclusion that while Torah is good for some, it is actually damaging for others. The midrash, however, rejects this possibility by bringing in the second water metaphor, dew:

It is, therefore, written: “My word shall flow as the dew”—Just as with dew, all the world is happy with it, so, words of Torah.

Torah is not functioning as Torah, this interpretation tells us, unless every single person is touched by Torah for the better. There is no such thing as a Torah that is “good” for some but not all. Although we might see parts of Torah that people experience as painful or harmful rather than a source of joy,
the midrash apparently cannot fathom this possibility. It inspires us to set our sights on a Torah that makes everyone happy.

Although it is apparently suppressed here, the idea of harmful Torah surfaces in other parts of the midrash as well. Moshe recalls the pain involved when he learned Torah, and shares with the people that they will inevitably also find their pursuit of Torah painful (though interestingly, the act of teaching Torah is not meant to instill pain).[2] In its most extreme articulation, the midrash speaks of Torah that can bring life or can kill:

Another Explanation: *“Let my taking (i.e., Torah) break (ya’arof) as the rain”*: R. Bana’ah says: If you learn words of Torah for their own sake, they are “life” for you, as it is written *“For they are life to him who finds them, and to all of his flesh healing”* (Mishlei 4:22) and if not, they kill you, as it is written, *“My taking (i.e., Torah) ya’arof as the rain,” arifah* being killing, “And they shall break (*ve’arfu*) there the neck of the heifer in the river-bed” (Devarim 21:4). And it is written, “For she (Torah) has taken many lives; the number of its victims is legion” (Mishlei 7:26).

It is not easy to swallow the idea that a sacred text we have held dearly for hundreds of years has the capacity to cause so much harm. What makes the difference between harsh Torah that kills and Torah that can nourish us? Our own intentions and actions make the difference. If we are approaching Torah for a noble purpose it will bring life. But if we do not approach Torah for this sake, it can be very dangerous. It all depends on us.

We find a similar sentiment based on the end of Parashat Haazinu, in a passage in the Talmud Yerushalmi. After he has imparted this song, Moshe tells the people

that Torah is not “empty” for them, but is their lives (כִּי לֹא־דָבָר רֵק הוּא מִכֶּם כִּי־הוּא חַיֵּיכֶם) (Devarim 32:47). And on this verse the sages teach

Talmud Yerushalmi Pe’ah 1:1

As R. Manna said: It is not empty for you—if it is empty, that is because of you. Why? Because you are not working hard at it. For it is your lives—when is it your lives? At the time that you work hard at it.

Sometimes when we see a piece of Torah, we might find that it is empty for us. It feels meaningless, or worse. At that point, we could just walk away. Or we could take a deep dive in. A sense of emptiness, or even embarrassment, in Torah can be a catalyst for soul-searching and creativity. The great medieval scholar Maimonides, who authored foundational works in Jewish philosophy and Jewish law, seems to have been motivated not only by “perplexity”[3] but also by embarrassment. As an epigraph to his seminal legal work the Mishneh Torah, he brings a verse from Psalms:

Rambam, Epigraph for Mishneh Torah

Then I will not be embarrassed when I gaze upon all of your commandments (Psalms 119:6)

Embarrassment could mean two things in this context. Perhaps Maimonides means to invoke the embarrassment of feeling daunted by the vast array of mitzvot, not knowing how to learn or practice them. His concise summary of Jewish law is an intervention responding to an embarrassment that stems from ignorance. But perhaps Maimonides means to invoke the embarrassment he feels as an Aristotelian philosopher when he encounters many aspects of Torah and mitzvot that do not conform to “reason.” For Maimonides the philosopher, if the Torah is based on false pretenses, it may seem “empty,” and thus a source of embarrassment rather than pride. So he organizes all of Jewish law in a way that rests upon foundational principles that align with the philosophical approach he finds compelling. He structures this code in a style similar to collections of Islamic law in his time, which organize law based on this kind of foundational principles. Now he is able to gaze upon all of the mitzvot without any lingering embarrassment. Looked at this way, the Mishneh Torah is an intervention to respond to embarrassment that stems from Torah feeling “empty” based on our own convictions.

Our embarrassment in Torah can induce engagement that bears precious fruit; it can fuel our work and participation in the unfolding Truth of Torah. Professor Harry Fox describes this kind of power of embarrassment as a catalyst in religious growth:

Harry Fox, Vixens Disturbing Vineyards, 2010, pg. 10

Embarrassment creates an incentive and an inducement for change…It is also important insofar as it affords an opportunity for theologians to provide strong

readings of these texts that cause the canonical, hence sacred, tradition to swerve in new and more benign directions.

When Torah comes down as a storm—Torah that feels deeply false, Torah that suppresses human dignity, Torah that even kills—and when we see the casualties of Torah gone wrong, it is so easy to want to run the other way, and try to escape these consequences and this embarrassment. But if we recognize embarrassment as a powerful religious tool, we have an opportunity to work within and through Torah itself. It can be hard work to cultivate the Torah that is rich and full, rather than dangerous or empty, but this is work that ultimately sustains us and our communities.

Why do this work?

As we set about determining where we will dig in and get to work on Torah, we are investing in improving Torah and our lives simultaneously. Wrestling with the challenges of Torah becomes an opportunity to wrestle with the challenges of our time. We confront the storms bringing harm to people today, in Torah and in the world around us, and insist on creating dew. A passage of Torah that seems to pose a threat to human dignity invites us to linger on how our own culture fails to fully honor human dignity and beckons us to probe more deeply. Our hard work on Torah becomes intertwined with work on difficult realities. Our encounter with Torah motivates us to do better in our world, and, by integrating our experience in our world into Torah, we can leave behind a Torah that is more gentle and nourishing for the next generation.

Confronting “empty” Torah means accepting our role as workers in Torah. Pirkei Avot speaks of us as day laborers in Torah, פועלים. A day laborer doesn’t always know what the next task is, and is sometimes not even sure that there will be work tomorrow. But the day laborer needs each day’s work very badly, to provide basic sustenance. So, too, we don’t always know how or whether we will find the next part of our work in Torah. But we need each day’s work in Torah in order to nourish us. And Torah needs our work, to actualize its full potential as a life-giving source for all, day in day out.

Throughout this cycle of divrei Torah, I have tried to demonstrate that when the difficulties of Torah surface it can be a blessing—an opportunity to sink into the real work of the moment and to cultivate the Torah that will bring blessing far beyond us. May our endeavors in Torah never end until we can be confident that it is a source of joy for all.

Shabbat Shalom.

1

...[יערף כמטר לקחי - אין לקחי אלא דברי תורה שנאמר (משלי ד) כי לקח טוב נתתי לכם]תורתי אל תעזבו

2

ד"א יערף כמטר - חכמים אומרים: אמר להם משה לישראל, שמא אתם יודעים כמה צער נצטערתי על התורה, וכמה עמל עמלתי בה, ומה יגיעה יגעתי בה, כענין שנא' (שמות לד) ויהי שם עם ה' ארבעים יום וארבעים לילה. ונכנסתי לבין המלאכים, ונכנסתי לבין החיות, ונכנסתי לבין השרפים שאחד מהם יכול לשרוף את כל העולם כולו,

שנאמ' (ישעיה ו) שרפים עומדים ממעל לו! נתתי נפשי עליה, דמי נתתי עליה, כשם שלמדתי אותה בצער - כך תהיו אתם למדים אותה בצער. או כדרך שאתם למדים אותה בצער, כך תהיו מלמדים אותם בצער? ת"ל תזל כטל אמרתי...

[3]As in the famous title of his philosophical work, Guide to the Perplexed.

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Yahrtzeits

Bob Woog remembers his father Cornelius M Woog on Tuesday October 11th (Tishri 16).

Rich Cohen remembers his father William Cohen on Tuesday October 11th (Tishri 16).

Edna Axelrod remembers her mother Edna Kaplan Ball Zehner on Thursday October 14th (Tishri 19).

Blossom Primer remembers Irwin’s sister Rose Rand on Thursday October 14th (Tishri 19).