



Parashat Ha'azinu: The Holy Swan Song

Dear Friends,

Parashat Ha'azinu is Moshe's swan song.

It is a beautiful parasha - not easy to understand and even more difficult to apply, because its message necessitates tremendous spiritual work. In fact, it relates the single and most difficult spiritual work there is, and... there is no formula for accomplishing it! It is not surprising, therefore, that even in the song itself Moshe predicts that Am Yisrael will fail to achieve its spiritual mission.

Moshe calls Am Yisrael **“That crooked, perverse generation...dull and witless people”** (D'varim 32:5-6). Don't take this personally. It isn't an Anti-Semitic attack, God forbid, but simply a very precise diagnosis of human consciousness.

The theology that Moshe presents here is entirely in contrast to modern, western thinking. Modernism places the individual in the center. He is in charge, she rules, he decides, and she chooses. The only thing more powerful, which sometimes subdues him or her, are the forces of nature. But have no fear, these, too, will submit to human ingenuity in the end. We already know how to prevent most illnesses, extend life, clone animals, change a fetuse's genetic makeup, dull pain, and calm nerves.

Parashat Ha'azinu does not negate this long list of scientific achievements. On the contrary! This is the role of humanity in the world, but that does not place us in its center. God, and only God occupies that spot.

And God is not “in the heavens”. This is a childish metaphor which, unfortunately, we are unable to free ourselves from (“Avinu Shebashamayim - our Heavenly Father - are the opening words of the prayer for the security of the State of Israel, written only 71 years ago.) And God does not “watch over us from above” or “pull the strings.”

In Parashat Ha'azinu, the name for God is "HaTsur", **“The Rock.”** This term appears in Israel's Declaration of Independence as well, as well as in the above-mentioned prayer for the state.

I love this expression very much, although, of course, words are always limited and can never be the thing itself. God, “who has no bodily image and has no body” (as explained in Rambam's 13 Principles), is also not describable with words. Therefore all the phrases we

use to describe Him - our Father, the Creator, the Holy One, Master of the Universe, etc. - will always miss the mark.

“The Rock” - “HaTzur” is both an expression of the strength of a foundation rock, and of the painter or creator of limits - “tzayar.” When we draw we create defined (“mugdar”) shapes on a page, we create borders or fences (“gader”). And of course the name of Egypt - Mitzrayim -, the archetype of enslaving materialism, also comes from the same root.

Therefore, “HaTzur” is the essential, original energy, the basic infrastructure from which everything else emerges, and it also creates all of the shapes in the material world, so that it is both the foundation and the founder.

Ha’azinu begins with a powerful statement:

“The Rock!—His deeds are perfect (Tamim)”(32:4). “Tamim” in Hebrew, means whole, indicating that the essential foundation of everything which forms all there is in the world, is whole and perfect.

“Is not He the Father who created you, Fashioned you and made you endure... fixed the boundaries of peoples?” (32:6, 8) - this foundation builds, conceives, forms, and separates between things and between people, enabling everything to exist.

“Like an eagle who rouses his nestlings, Gliding down to his young, So did He spread His wings and take him” (32:11) - just as He is the inner foundation, so, too, is He the external Protector, like a giant bird spreading its wings over its young.

“The LORD alone did guide him, No alien god at His side.” (32:12) In other words, it is not one’s ego that drives him, not her personal will, his plans, or her personal destiny, contrary to today’s western understanding of individual, personal destiny.

No! That same founding energy enables all of creation and defines all of its shapes. It and only it guides human beings and all of Creation. Anything else - ego, personal desires, individual destiny - is alien idol worship.

Is this a challenging thought?

Of course it is! But I did say right at the beginning that it was going to be, and that it requires a tremendous amount of spiritual work.

Later on in the parasha Moshe describes human confusion, which is the source of all of human suffering:

“So Jeshurun [Israel] grew fat and kicked— You grew fat and gross and coarse— He forsook the God who made him And spurned the Rock of his support.” After Am Yisrael (and any people, anywhere) becomes satiated from all of the goodness that the world has to offer, he forgets, gets confused, spurns his source, the foundation of all of existence:

“They sacrificed to demons, no-gods, gods they had never known, new ones, who came but lately, who stirred not your fathers’ awe.” (32:17) We begin to worship various idols - ghosts of our own imagination, modern things, new things that have recently been

added to the list, like biology, physics, genetics, and technology - thinking that these are the source of life and that redemption may be found in them.

“You neglected the Rock that begot you, Forgot the God who brought you forth.” This forgetfulness is the source of all human suffering and existential pain.

Any time we designate something that has been created by something else as the source of life and the foundation of existence, we are following foreign gods, which is the beginning of terrible, addictive idol worship - e.g., the worship of technology, money, science, beauty, super-foods, youth, etc.

And all of these things are wonderful, without doubt! Just as wild flowers and trees are masterpieces, each and every one! But they have all been created. None of them can be the source. They cannot be the foundation. They are not the Rock. They are not the painters or the creators.

When a person is able to connect - even for a few moments (because more than that is usually impossible to achieve) - to the Founding energy, to the Creating power, the unknown Painter of our lives, his or her life changes immeasurably. All of the suffering and confusion drops away. Nothing changes externally, but everything changes in our inner world.

Ha'azinu, Moshe's swan song, is his final chance, a moment before his death, to pass on this revolutionary message in the most precise way.

Luckily, we read this parasha again every year, because a person who wishes to return to the Fountain of Life needs to return to this song again and again in order to understand, experience, and then to remember over and over again.

Because forgetfulness is part of the human story. Forgetting, remembering, forgetting again, and then remembering again, each cycle bringing us a little bit higher, a little bit deeper.

Unfortunately, I have no formula to offer. If there was one, Moshe would have thought of it at the time, and he would not have been so pessimistic regarding human nature. There is no mitzvah, no path, and no marked way of going about it.

There is only remembrance, over and over again.

And there is a compass: Moshe's holy swan song is there for those willing to hear it.

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha