

Stollen Moments – Ha’azinu – September 18, 2021

PARASHA SUMMARY FROM WWW. REFORMJUDAISM.ORG

- Moses sings his last song, a love poem to God and a chastisement of the people, who are not worthy of Adonai. (32:1–6)
- The poem recounts the blessings that God has bestowed on the Israelites, the wicked deeds they have committed, and the punishments that God then inflicted upon them. (32:7–43)
- God tells Moses to begin his ascent of Mount Nebo, from where he will see the Land of Israel from a distance but will not be allowed to enter it. (32:45–52)

Deuteronomy 32

1 Give ear, O heavens, let me speak;
Let the earth hear the words I utter!
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.
3 For the name of the Lord I proclaim;
Give glory to our God!

4 The Rock! — His deeds are perfect,
Yea, all His ways are just;
A faithful God, never false,
True and upright is He.
5 Children unworthy of Him —
That crooked, perverse generation —
Their baseness has played Him false.
6 Do you thus requite the Lord,
O dull and witless people?
Is not He the Father who created you,
Fashioned you and made you endure!

7 Remember the days of old,
Consider the years of ages past;
Ask your father, he will inform you,
Your elders, they will tell you:
8 When the Most High gave nations their homes
And set the divisions of man,
He fixed the boundaries of peoples
In relation to Israel's numbers.
9 For the Lord's portion is His people,
Jacob His own allotment.

10 He found him in a desert region,
In an empty howling waste.
He engirded him, watched over him,
Guarded him as the pupil of His eye.
11 Like an eagle who rouses his nestlings,
Gliding down to his young,
So did He spread His wings and take him,
Bear him along on His pinions;
12 The Lord alone did guide him,
No alien god at His side.
13 He set him atop the highlands,
To feast on the yield of the earth;
He fed him honey from the crag,
And oil from the flinty rock,
14 Curd of kine and milk of flocks;
With the best of lambs,
And rams of Bashan, and he-goats;
With the very finest wheat —
And foaming grape-blood was your drink.

15 So Jeshurun 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.
16 They incensed Him with alien things,
Vexed Him with abominations.
17 They sacrificed to demons, no-gods,
Gods they had never known,
New ones, who came but lately,
Who stirred not your fathers' fears.

18 You neglected the Rock that begot you,
Forgot the God who brought you forth.

19 The Lord saw and was vexed
And spurned His sons and His daughters.

20 He said:

I will hide My countenance from them,
And see how they fare in the end.

For they are a treacherous breed,
Children with no loyalty in them.

21 They incensed Me with no-gods,
Vexed Me with their futilities;

I'll incense them with a no-folk,
Vex them with a nation of fools.

22 For a fire has flared in My wrath
And burned to the bottom of Sheol,
Has consumed the earth and its increase,
Eaten down to the base of the hills.

23 I will sweep misfortunes on them,
Use up My arrows on them:

24 Wasting famine, ravaging plague,
Dedly pestilence, and fanged beasts

Will I let loose against them,
With venomous creepers in dust.

25 The sword shall deal death without,
As shall the terror within,

To youth and maiden alike,
The suckling as well as the aged.

26 I might have reduced them to naught,
Made their memory cease among men,

27 But for fear of the taunts of the foe,
Their enemies who might misjudge
And say, "Our own hand has prevailed;
None of this was wrought by the Lord!"

28 For they are a folk void of sense,
Lacking in all discernment.

29 Were they wise, they would think upon this,
Gain insight into their future:

30 "How could one have routed a thousand,
Or two put ten thousand to flight,

Unless their Rock had sold them,
The Lord had given them up?"

31 For their rock is not like our Rock,
In our enemies' own estimation.

32 Ah! The vine for them is from Sodom,
From the vineyards of Gomorrah;

The grapes for them are poison,
A bitter growth their clusters.

33 Their wine is the venom of asps,
The pitiless poison of vipers.

34 Lo, I have it all put away,

Sealed up in My storehouses,

35 To be My vengeance and recompense,
At the time that their foot falters.

Yea, their day of disaster is near,
And destiny rushes upon them.

36 For the Lord will vindicate His people
And take revenge for His servants,

When He sees that their might is gone,
And neither bond nor free is left.

37 He will say: Where are their gods,
The rock in whom they sought refuge,

38 Who ate the fat of their offerings
And drank their libation wine?

Let them rise up to your help,

And let them be a shield unto you!

39 See, then, that I, I am He;

There is no god beside Me.

I deal death and give life;

I wounded and I will heal:

None can deliver from My hand.

40 Lo, I raise My hand to heaven

And say: As I live forever,

41 When I whet My flashing blade

And My hand lays hold on judgment,

Vengeance will I wreak on My foes,

Will I deal to those who reject Me.

42 I will make My arrows drunk with blood —

As My sword devours flesh —

Blood of the slain and the captive

From the long-haired enemy chiefs.

43 O nations, acclaim His people!

For He'll avenge the blood of His servants,

Wreak vengeance on His foes,

And cleanse the land of His people.

44 Moses came, together with Hosea son of Nun, and recited all the words of this poem in the hearing of the people.

45 And when Moses finished reciting all these words to all Israel, 46 he said to them: Take to heart all the words with which I have warned you this day. Enjoin them upon your children, that they may observe faithfully all the terms of this Teaching. 47 For this is not a trifling thing for you: it is your very life; through it you shall long endure on the land that you are to possess upon crossing the Jordan.

48 That very day the Lord spoke to Moses: 49 Ascend these heights of Abarim to Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab facing Jericho, and view the land of Canaan, which I am giving the Israelites as their holding. 50 You shall die on the mountain that you are about to ascend, and shall be gathered to your kin, as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his kin; 51 for you both broke faith with Me among the Israelite people, at the waters of Meribath-kadesh in the wilderness of Zin, by failing to uphold My sanctity among the Israelite people. 52 You may view the land from a distance, but you shall not enter it — the land that I am giving to the Israelite people.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

With Ha'azinu we climb to one of the peaks of Jewish spirituality. For a month Moses had taught the people. He had told them their history and destiny, and the laws that would make theirs a unique society of people bound in covenant with one another and with God. He renewed the covenant and then handed the leadership on to his successor and disciple Joshua. His final act would be blessing the people, tribe by tribe. But before that, there was one more thing he had to do. He had to sum up his prophetic message in a way the people would always remember and be inspired by. He knew that the best way of doing so is by music. So the last thing Moses did before giving the people his deathbed blessing was to teach them a song.

There is something profoundly spiritual about music. When language aspires to the transcendent, and the soul longs to break free of the gravitational pull of the earth, it modulates into song. Jewish history is not so much read as sung. The rabbis enumerated ten songs at key moments in the life of the nation. There was the song of the Israelites in Egypt (see Is. 30:29), the song at the Red Sea (Ex. 15), the song at the well (Num. 21), and Ha'azinu, Moses' song at the end of his life. Joshua sang a song (Josh. 10:12-13). So did Deborah (Jud. 5), Hannah (1 Sam. 2) and David (2 Sam. 22). There was the Song of Solomon, Shir ha-Shirim, about which Rabbi Akiva said, "All songs are holy but the Song of Songs is the holy of holies."^[1] The tenth song has not yet been sung. It is the song of the Messiah.^[2]

Many biblical texts speak of the power of music to restore the soul. When Saul was depressed, David would play for him and his spirit would be restored (1 Sam. 16). David himself was known as the "sweet singer of Israel" (2 Sam. 23:1). Elisha called for a harpist to play so that the prophetic spirit could rest upon him (2 Kings 3:15). The Levites sang in the Temple. Every day, in Judaism, we preface our morning prayers with Pesukei de-Zimra, the 'Verses of Song' with their magnificent crescendo, Psalm 150, in which instruments and the human voice combine to sing God's praises.

Mystics go further and speak of the song of the universe, what Pythagoras called "the music of the spheres". This is what Psalm 19 means when it says, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands . . . There is no speech, there are no words, where their voice is not heard. Their music^[3] carries throughout the earth, their words to the end of the world." Beneath the silence, audible only to the inner ear, creation sings to its Creator.

So, when we pray, we do not read: we sing. When we engage with sacred texts, we do not recite: we chant. Every text and every time has, in Judaism, its own specific melody. There are different tunes for shacharit, mincha and maariv, the morning, afternoon and evening prayers. There are different melodies and moods for the prayers for a weekday, Shabbat, the three pilgrimage festivals, Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot (which have much musically in common but also tunes distinctive to each), and for the Yamim Noraim, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

There are different tunes for different texts. There is one kind of cantillation for Torah, another for the haftorah from the prophetic books, and yet another for Ketuvim, the Writings, especially the five Megillot. There is a particular chant for studying the texts of the written Torah: Mishnah and Gemarah. So by music alone we can tell what kind of day it is and what kind of text is being used. Jewish texts and times are not colour-coded but music-coded. The map of holy words is written in melodies and songs.

Music has extraordinary power to evoke emotion. The Kol Nidrei prayer with which Yom Kippur begins is not really a prayer at all. It is a dry legal formula for the annulment of vows. There can be little doubt that it is its ancient, haunting melody that has given it its hold over the Jewish imagination. It is hard to hear those notes and not feel that you are in the presence of God on the Day of Judgment, standing in the company of Jews of all places and times as they plead with heaven for forgiveness. It is the holy of holies of the Jewish soul.[4]

Nor can you sit on Tisha B'av reading Eichah, the book of Lamentations, with its own unique cantillation, and not feel the tears of Jews through the ages as they suffered for their faith and wept as they remembered what they had lost, the pain as fresh as it was the day the Temple was destroyed. Words without music are like a body without a soul.

Beethoven wrote over the manuscript of the third movement of his A Minor Quartet the words *Neue Kraft fühlend*, "Feeling new strength." That is what music expresses and evokes. It is the language of emotion unsicklied by the pale cast of thought. That is what King David meant when he sang to God the words: "You turned my grief into dance; You removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing to You and not be silent." You feel the strength of the human spirit no terror can destroy.

In his book, *Musicophilia*, the late Oliver Sacks (no relative, alas) told the poignant story of Clive Wearing, an eminent musicologist who was struck by a devastating brain infection. The result was acute amnesia. He was unable to remember anything for more than a few seconds. As his wife Deborah put it, "It was as if every waking moment was the first waking moment."

Unable to thread experiences together, he was caught in an endless present that had no connection with anything that had gone before. One day his wife found him holding a chocolate in one hand and repeatedly covering and uncovering it with the other hand, saying each time, "Look, it's new." "It's the same chocolate," she said. "No," he replied, "Look. It's changed." He had no past at all.

Two things broke through his isolation. One was his love for his wife. The other was music. He could still sing, play the organ and conduct a choir with all his old skill and verve. What was it about music, Sacks asked, that enabled him, while playing or conducting, to overcome his amnesia? He suggests that when we "remember" a melody, we recall one note at a time, yet each note relates to the whole. He quotes the philosopher of music, Victor Zuckerkandl, who wrote, "Hearing a melody is hearing, having heard, and being about to hear, all at once. Every melody declares to us that the past can be there without being remembered, the future without being foreknown." Music is a form of sensed continuity that can sometimes break through the most overpowering disconnections in our experience of time.

Faith is more like music than science.[5] Science analyses, music integrates. And as music connects note to note, so faith connects episode to episode, life to life, age to age in a timeless melody that breaks into time. God is the composer and librettist. We are each called on to be voices in the choir, singers of God's song. Faith is the ability to hear the music beneath the noise.

So music is a signal of transcendence. The philosopher and musician Roger Scruton writes that it is "an encounter with the pure subject, released from the world of objects, and moving in obedience to the laws of freedom alone." [6] He quotes Rilke: "Words still go softly out towards the unsayable / And music, always new, from palpitating stones / builds in useless space its godly home." [7] The history of the Jewish spirit is written in its songs.

I once watched a teacher explaining to young children the difference between a physical possession and a spiritual one. He had them build a paper model of Jerusalem. Then (this was in the days of tape-recorders) he put on a tape with a song about Jerusalem that he taught to the class. At the end of the session he did something very dramatic. He tore up the model and shredded the tape. He asked the children, "Do we still have the model?" They replied, No. "Do we still have the song?" They replied, Yes.

We lose physical possessions, but not spiritual ones. We lost the physical Moses. But we still have the song.