

Ha'Azinu - 5783

Technically, we have reached the end of the yearly cycle of parshiot that takes us from the beginning of Bereshit to the end of Devarim. All that is left are the several verses of Zot Beracha which we are meant to read on Simchat Torah both in the evening and then the following morning. In our congregation, we read all of it and the beginning of Bereshit in the evening since we know we wouldn't get a minyan in the morning. That, however, is a sidebar to the main narrative of my Davar Torah this morning.

My preparation for today came after a read an article that was a link in the magazine called Tablet that I get in my inbox every day. Far too many of the titles indicate the articles and their writers are advocating a very right-wing approach to the world. But the particular headline I opened up from referred to a different interpretation of The Book of Jonah which we will read tomorrow afternoon. I must say, in thinking about what I read in that particular article gives additional meaning not only to Jonah but also to this particular parsha and its placement in the calendar of reading. Let me explain.

In this article about Jonah, the writer points out that he always reads the last chapter of a mystery book first and explains that he does that so that he'll know if reading the book will be a pleasurable experience or not trying to figure out how the storyline evolves. Using this as his starting point, he suggests that the meaning for us in the Book of Jonah lies in the last two verses in which, he maintains, we learn that HaShem softens and changes his position about Nineveh. He decides to save the people and Jonah's journey was only the means to that end. HaShem shows himself to be imperfect sometimes and misjudged the stance he took towards Jonah and

Nineveh. We are therefore meant to realize at Neilah and Ma'Ariv of Yom Kippur that, indeed, HaShem might not be perfect and so he will repent and save us just as he saves in Jonah.

Then we come to how to interpret and what to take away from Ha'Azinu. Rabbi Bex Stern-Rosenblatt in her Davar Torah this week emanating from the Fuchsberg Centre for Conservative Judaism in Jerusalem, draws attention to the description of HaShem as a rock eight times in this parsha. She writes:

“Much of Ha'Azinu is devoted to exploring the difference between God and humanity.

God is perfect and inscrutable; humans are fallible and capable of change. This contrast is most pronounced in Deuteronomy 32:4. We read, “The Rock, His acts are perfect, for all His ways are justice. A steadfast God without wrong, true, and right is He.” Each of the words describing God here carries a wealth of biblical associations, which deepen the contrast between God and humans, helping us to understand just how far from God we are by nature and how much we can always strive to return and repair ourselves in attempt to achieve the idea of our creation *btzelem elohim*, in the image of God.

When I used to teach science to elementary students, one of the compulsory units in each grade was based on elements of physical science and in the primary grades, we would spend a lot of time trying to expand the concepts of matter. Of course, a rock is hard and can only change its nature as a result of other physical forces. We are limited by how much we can change its nature in the laboratory. Bex Stern points out that God is perfect as described at the end of Devarim and it emphasizes the huge divide between our nature and that of HaShem's. It emphasizes OUR ability to change and be more perfect. So, when we read Ha'Azinu we are left with a feeling of despair. How can we ever expect to become more perfect if HaShem is so unattainable.

Think about how, as teenagers, we looked at our classmates and held them up and compared ourselves to them and we always came out wanting. We are meant, on the Shabbat before Yom Kippur, to feel the same way. What is man to think he can be more godlike? Who are we to believe we can be a partner with HaShem in the perfecting of the world and mankind?

My grandfather Max Dental used to say if you open the door, I am going to go through it. He was referring to saying things that one of his children or grandchildren might not want to hear. The rabbi, on Rosh Hashana, suggested the same thing in talking about writing letters to his children like Jacob did on his deathbed, sort of, telling his children like he saw it. I felt that way reading Ha'Azinu. Sometimes we have to get really low before we can come back up. Literature is replete with novels that show men and women sinking to their lowest level before they realize they have to change. Isn't that what Jonah had to do as well?

Then, on Yom Kippur, meant to be immediately after the Shabbat on which we read Ha'Azinu, we are bombarded we are bombarded with images of man at his lowest point, humble, repentant, beseeching HaShem to forgive us and give us another chance. And Jonah reminds us that sometimes HaShem realizes he is not perfect and because he realizes he is not perfect; he forgives his people and allows them to begin again. And then what do we read immediately after Yom Kippur on the first appropriate opportunity, the beginning of Bereshit. At the beginning. WE are reminded that HaShem created the world and Adam and Eve, Adam V'Chava, sinned and were kicked out of the Garden of Eden, but look at what happened! Adam begat Noach who begat Avraham who began Yitzchak who begat Yaakov, who begat 12 sons who ended up in Egypt as slaves and then Moses took us to Sinai and to the Holy Land. The cycle continues. Like the Circle of Life that we hear in The Lion King.

Shabbat Shalom.