

## Between the Lines

Weekly Midrash Learning with Rabbi Charlie Schwartz

Deuteronomy Rabbah 10

כך ברא הקב"ה את עולמו יום שיהא יום ולילה שיהא לילה, בא יעקב ועשה את היום לילה ששקע לו הקב"ה את השמש שלא בעונתה שנאמר)בראשית כח) ויפגע במקום וילן שם כי בא השמש בא יהושע ועשה הלילה יום שנא' (יהושע י) שמש בגבעון דום הרי שהצדיקים גורעים ומוסיפים על דבריו של הקב"ה כדי שיהיו הבריות יראין מלפניו ... כך ברא הקב"ה שמים וארץ שיהיו מקלסים אותו מנין שנאמר (תהלים יט) השמים מספרים כבוד אל כיון שבא משה שיתק אותו מנין שנאמר האזינו השמים .

God created the world, so that day would be day, and night would be night. Along came Jacob and God made the day night by making the sun set early, as it is written, "He came upon a certain place and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set (Gen. 28:11)." Along came Joshua and God made night day, as it is written, "Stand still, O sun at Gibeon" (Josh. 10:12). For the righteous, God adds and takes away from God's word so that creation will be in awe before God . . . God created the Heavens and the Earth that they would praise God, as it is written, "The Heavens declare the glory of God," along came Moses and quieted them as it is written, "Give ear O heavens" (Deut. 32:1).

What in this world is set in stone, and what can be changed? As the seasons shift and we approach Yom Kippur, these questions become more relevant, more powerful. It is these questions that this week's midrash seeks to answer. In a roundabout way, our midrash links a series of texts (only a few of which appear above) around the theme of inverting the natural order of the world for the sake of the righteous, providing examples of when day became night, and night day, when the sky traded places with the sea, when the sea was transformed into dry land. The midrash ends its journey through Jewish scripture with the opening words of Ha-azinu. Interwoven with the joy the midrash takes in connecting such disparate texts we find a subtle but clear message: Nothing in this world is set in stone. Not day, not night, not oceans, or dry land. Everything can change and be changed.

While at other times of the year this lack of permanence might induce fear, now during the season of repentance, it is a beacon of hope. Just as the world can change, so too can we. Our personal weaknesses, flawed relationships, and shortcomings, which can seem as certain as night and day and sea and dry land, can change and be transformed. Just as for the sake of the righteous, God transforms the order of the natural world, when we focus on refining our own righteousness, we too can be transformed.

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# Torah from JTS

Parashat Ha-azinu  
Deuteronomy 32:1–32:52  
October 1, 2011  
3 Tishrei 5772

## Parashah Commentary

**This week's commentary was written by Dr. Ofra Backenroth, associate dean of the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education and adjunct professor of Jewish Education, JTS.**

A few years ago, my family and I went on a bar mitzvah trip to Israel. Following a celebratory and meaningful weekend that included a beautiful party, a prayer service near the Western Wall, and a tour of the archeological excavations underneath the wall, we were taken on a memorable tour of Petra in Jordan. On the way south, on the east side of the Jordan River, we stopped at Har Nevo (Mount Nebo).

Standing on Har Nevo, looking at the desert spread in front of me on the other side of the Jordan River, I thought about Moshe and the last time he stood on top of this mountain overlooking Israel, reaching out to the land of Israel, so close, but yet so far. As described at the end of Deuteronomy, "And Moses went up from the steps of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the summit of Pisgah opposite Jericho. And the Lord showed him the whole land, Gilead as far as Dan" (Deut. 34:1).

What does it mean to a leader who, for 40 long years, led the people of Israel in the desert, providing for all their needs, and, in the end, was forbidden to enter the Promised Land? What a tragic end to a life of service and dedication. Moshe is separated from his destination by the decree of God. "And the Lord said to him: 'This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, 'I will assign it to your offspring.' I have let you see it with your own eyes, but you shall not cross there'" (Deut. 34:4). In the previous chapter, another obstacle is mentioned—Moshe is not destined to cross the water of Meribath Kaadesh: "You shall die on the mountain that you are about to ascend . . . for you . . . broke faith with Me among the Israelite people at the waters of Meribath-Kaadesh in the wilderness of Zin . . ." (Deut. 32:51).

We realize that it is not the first time that Moshe encounters water and is seriously impacted by it. The first time happened when Moshe was saved from the decree of the killing of the firstborn son when his *teva* (basket) was placed in the river Nile by his mother and sister to hide him from Pharaoh's guards. His name, Moshe, was coined after the act of being pulled out of the water, "She named him Moses, explaining, 'I drew him out of the water'" (Gen. 2:10). The second time, Moshe courageously led the people of Israel through the Sea of Reeds and saved them from

the strong hand of Pharaoh (Exod. 14). The third time, Moshe brought out water from the rock as the people of Israel began the long years of travel in the desert following God's orders, "Strike the rock and water will issue from it, and the people will drink" (Exod. 17:6). The fourth time happened in Numbers 20 when again Moshe needed to draw water out of the rock. However, this time, God's instructions were different; Moshe was asked to speak to the rock. Instead, "Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod. Out came copious water, and the community and their beasts drank" (Num. 20:11). Soon after, Moshe learned that because he did not obey and trust God and struck the rock instead of speaking, he would not lead the people of Israel into the land of Israel.

This statement is repeated in chapter 34 of Parashat Ha-azinu. We learn that Moshe was not allowed to cross the river Jordan into Israel because of the incident described in Parashat Hukat, hitting the rock to draw forth water. We meet him standing hopelessly and probably heartbroken on the top of Mount Nevo, staring at the west bank of the Jordan River.

The scene of Moshe standing on Mount Nevo, looking at the yearned-for, beloved land, is a powerful one that became an evocative motif in literature and poetry. Rachel Bluwstein, the poet known by her first name Rachel (or Rachel the poetess), wrote a short but powerful poem, *From Afar*, expressing the yearning that Moshe must have felt standing on Har Nevo:

Outspread hands, gaze from afar  
There no one comes  
Each and his Nevo  
Over a vast land

Rachel transforms the last moments of Moshe—standing on the mountain overlooking the Promised Land that he will never enter—into an existential mode of yearning for the unachievable. Standing on Nevo becomes a symbol for unfulfilled yearnings.

I would like to relate this situation of yearning to an issue that has concerned us at the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education—something that was unfulfilled, but unlike the experience of Moshe and the way it is described in Rachel's poem, is finally being attained. Committed to Israel education, The Davidson School, for many years, was hoping to create a program in which students would be able to study for a semester in Israel; immerse themselves in Israeli culture, art, and Hebrew language; and learn about and engage with Israel's religious, social, and political issues in an authentic way that only a prolonged stay in the country could provide. Sending the students across the ocean was an inspired and thought-provoking task not only in terms of the physical challenges but also in terms of the type of program the school was aspiring to create. Keshet Hadash (New Connection), The Davidson School's new semester-in-Israel program, whose first cohort comes together later this year, is a program that aspires to be a new model of professional development for future American communal and educational leaders. The program's vision, curriculum, and structure are cutting-edge in terms of educational goals and practices. As its name suggests, the program requires participants to create connections, be fully engaged, and grapple with the problems and challenges that Israelis face in their everyday lives. In fact, the students will be purposefully placed in situations where, together with Israeli educators-in-training, they will be encouraged to seek ways to tackle those challenges. The program promotes Israel engagement in an educational mode that requires an activist's attitude.

With the support of a generous grant from the Jim Joseph Foundation, we are

pleased to offer the Keshet Hadash program to our students, at long last. We wish the first cohort of participants success in their new adventure and in finding their own way of entering the Promised Land.

*The publication and distribution of the JTS Commentary are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee and Harold (z"l) Hassenfeld.*

## A Taste of Torah

### A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS

In so many ways, the signature story of Rosh Hashanah is that of *Akeidat Yitzhak*, the Binding of Isaac. From God's testing of Abraham, to the weighty journey undertaken by Abraham and Isaac, to the binding of Isaac and restraining of Abraham's hand, and ultimately to its relatively happy ending in the sacrifice of a ram, there is a great deal of resonance with our own individual quests this time of year. Precisely for this reason, it is worth delving further into this narrative and asking two central questions: Why doesn't Abraham protest at God's initial demand to sacrifice his son? And how does the appearance of the ram project forward to our observance of Rosh Hashanah? *Midrash Tanhuma*, a remarkable collection of midrashim, offers a rich and thoughtful rabbinic response to these queries.

First, just as we struggle with Abraham's acquiescence to God's request, so too did the Rabbis of the midrash. In a moving conversation between Abraham and God after his tension-filled trial, Abraham remarks, "When you commanded me to sacrifice Isaac, I should have replied: 'Yesterday You told me that "in Isaac will your seed be called" [Gen. 21:12]; now You say to me, "Offer him up there as a burnt offering" [Gen. 22:2]. Nevertheless, I restrained my impulse and did not reply as I should have done. So now, when Isaac's children will sin and find themselves in distress, may You, God, be mindful as though in fact his ash were heaped upon the altar—be then filled with compassion for his children, forgive them and redeem them from their distress" (*Midrash Tanhuma* 22–23). Clearly, from this midrashic portrayal, Abraham regrets not fighting back when God issues the chilling demand. Our patriarch, knowing well that he now speaks from a position of strength, urges God to remember the near sacrifice of Isaac and account it as a merit to his descendants. In response, God accedes to Abraham's request but adds one requirement: the sounding of the shofar to remind all of Isaac's trial.

Second, *Midrash Tanhuma* adds deeper meaning, other than the blowing of the shofar, to the appearance and sacrifice of the ram in place of Isaac. *Tanhuma* teaches, "The ram came from the mountains, and throughout the day, Abraham saw the ram become entangled in a tree, break loose, and go free; become entangled in a bush, break loose, and go free; become entangled in a thicket, break loose, and go free. The Holy One said, 'Abraham, even so will your children be entangled in many kinds of sin and trapped within successive kingdoms . . . in the end, they will be redeemed at the sound of the shofar" (ibid. 22–23). The ram, then, becomes a symbol for the people Israel. Just as this animal's struggle mirrors Israel becoming entangled with oppressors, so too does its breaking loose provide hope for Israel.

Thus, this rich rabbinic composition highlights the two core acts of *teshuvah* (repentance): regret and hope. Abraham's regret for not "pushing back" and the ram as a symbol of temporary entanglement but eternal hope are two powerful symbols that may inspire our personal journeys toward repentance this Rosh Hashanah.

*The publication and distribution of A Taste of Torah are made possible by a generous grant from Sam and Marilee Susi.*