

own gift for poetry, and by our own sleepy selves. From our individual vantage point, with the help of their words abounding in love, we can reach out to God, whose mission was championed by Moses in a dramatic, pain-filled poem, recited to a difficult people at a difficult moment. We can take from Moses's words the passion he intended, setting aside the anger he produced.

The year is new! May the words we write and the words we say attain the virtuosity of Ha'azinu; and may our *lekakh*, our wisdom, fall gently as rain and softly as drops of dew, on old loved ones and new, in this blessed new year.

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האזינו תשע"ט



## Our Very Life

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At the end of his life, with Joshua by his side, Moses begins his great, thunderous poem, Ha'azinu, summoning the heavens and the earth as witnesses to his powerful, angry message, as God commanded him to do in the preceding parashah, Vayelekh. And yet, in a one-verse *reshut*, a prayerful, wishful intention, preceding the central portion of his sermonic poem, he says that he wants his words to land lightly: "May my discourse come down as the rain, my speech distill as the dew, like showers on young growth, like droplets on the grass" (Deut. 32:2). Then suddenly, the central, angry theme emerges, and he calls the people "unworthy of [God], crooked, perverse" (32:5), "dull and witless" (32:6).

The poem that then unfolds is stunningly beautiful, but the message is harsh, warning of the disastrous consequences of disobeying God. Indeed, its grim telling of the terrible consequences of disobedience accounts for a Sephardi tradition to read Ha'azinu on Tishah Be'av. What are we to do with Ha'azinu this year, when it falls on the Shabbat preceding our most joyous holiday, Sukkot?

After the poem concludes, Moses explains his and God's motivation. He says:

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. 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. (32:46–47, emphases added)

Their lives *depend on* their obedience! Moses's message in this sermonic poem is both important and urgent, and the people are in danger of ignoring it. Thinking back over *kol hadevarim*, "all the words," namely the grand scope of laws expressed in Deuteronomy, from civic laws about regulating the economy and providing for the poor, to the administration of justice, to the conduct of war, to laws governing holiday celebrations, to laws regulating marriage, these do add up to *life itself*.

The very comprehensiveness of Deuteronomic laws asserts the potential of every volitional act of daily life to possess moral content, and to partake of the Divine. This comprehensiveness teaches that morality is deeply essential to human life, and specifically to life in the Promised Land. Obedience to just laws is much more than conformity: it is the implementation of coherent morality in a society. To risk losing this in the new Land was heart-breaking for God and for Moses.

After Moses's death, we will read in the book of Joshua that the next great Jewish leader will learn from God how to convey values and laws to his people. When Joshua is about to lead the people into battle, God says to him:

Be strong and resolute, for you shall apportion to this people the land that I swore to their fathers to assign to them. But you must be very strong and resolute to observe faithfully all the Torah that My servant Moses enjoined upon you. Do not deviate from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Let not this Book of the Teaching cease from your lips, but recite it day and night, so that you may observe faithfully all that is written in it. Only then will you prosper in your undertakings and only then will you be successful. (Josh. 1:6–8)

As the people enter the Land, Joshua is taught by God that it is the leader's role not only to take them into battle, but one day to apportion the Land fairly, and to teach God's law, and to study it. The ancient modality of learning—disciplined, repetitive recitation—is how sacred texts will enter a person, whether Joshua or the average Israelite,

changing neural pathways, laying down a person's ethical vocabulary. Joshua, the powerful military leader, is instructed to focus on God's laws, not on military strategy, as he begins the conquest. As a lesson offered on the brink of battle, it is radically civilizing.

A further softening takes place much later, in the period when the Rabbis were inventing Jewish prayer. They expressed their appreciation for God's teachings and laws in the blessings that precede the Shema, recited morning and evening. The prayer *Ahavat Olam*, said at night, contains the following statement about the value of *Torah u-mitzvot*, and how they are to be transmitted:

*Ki hem hayyenu ve'orekh yamenu, u-vahem nehgeh yomam valailah*

*For they are our life and the length of our days, and we will recite them day and night*

Yissachar Jacobson notes (*Netiv Binah*, I: 406) that the first part of this sentence in *Ahavat Olam* derives from two phrases said by Moses near the end of his life: one in Nitzavim, "*For thereby you shall have life and shall long endure upon the soil that the Lord swore to your ancestors . . .*" (Deut. 30:20); and one which we have just seen in Ha'azinu (32:47). The second part of the sentence in *Ahavat Olam* comes from the passage above from Joshua (1:8).

These rabbis loved the idea of reciting God's teaching day and night, not only for the leader, but for every Jew. They loved the process of turning to God through words, and they loved the idea that God offers guidance through words, through learning, and through law, to anyone willing to study. Loving these ideas and practices, they connected the words of Moses and of Joshua and placed them in a context of divine love. They coined the phrase *ahavat olam*, "eternal love," to characterize God's gifts of guidance, structure, and meaning. *Ahavat Olam* is the love-affirming preamble to hearing the sacred, covenantal Shema emerge from our own lips each night. We murmur this prayer faithfully and gently: as gently as rain on new growth, as dew falling on grass.

Moses's wish for his words to land gently is finally realized long after he is gone, shaped by Joshua's experience of God, and by rabbis with their