

He bargains with God: *Let me enter the Land, live there for a year or two and then die!* God makes a counteroffer: *If you insist on entering the Land, do so, but then I will block the Israelites from entering and they will have to wander the desert forever.* God knows that Moses could never doom his people to eternal exile. Moses then suggests that God let him enter the Land through underground tunnels so that God could evade his own oath that Moses would never cross over the Jordan river (Deut. 31:2). God counters that Moses's life span was decreed long ago to be 120 years, no more and no less. Moses offers to enter the Land as a servant while Joshua leads the people in his place. God now begs Moses not to bargain with him: To resist is not worthy of Moses's stature or his reputation as man of humble piety. He must know that God does not decree death lightly. He should accept his fate with dignity, in a spirit of submission.

Unable to abandon his desire to see the Holy Land, Moses reaches for the fantastic. He begs: "Transform me into a fish in the Jordan so that I might at least glimpse the Holy Land while swimming; transform me into a cloud so that I might glimpse the Holy Land from above."

God has had enough; He puts an end to the entire argument with a speech that humanizes Himself without conceding an iota of His transcendence. God confesses that He has found Moses's speeches beautiful, but He demands obedience. He will make Moses's death a sweetness rather than the horror that it is for ordinary men, for Moses will die by the divine kiss. God regrets His own decree, but His decree it is, and even God is bound by it.

What more consolation could a man on the point of death want than these touching words?

An end to beautiful words, / Speech without blemish!
Yield to my power. / Die at the kiss of my mouth.
Beloved and trustworthy friend despite this— / Do not go on
saying this.
Sorry I am that I decreed this, / But what can I do? Decreed is
this.

¹The poem may be found in the edition of Pinehas's complete poems by Shulamit Elizur (Jerusalem, 2004, 559-69); one stanza appears in Hebrew and English in T. Carmi's *Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*, 269-70. Only the rites of Corfu and Rome carried on the recitation of this poem into modern times, as part of the service for Simhat Torah. A discussion of the poem may be found in Shulamit Elizur, *Shirah shel parashah* (Jerusalem, 1999), 332-41.

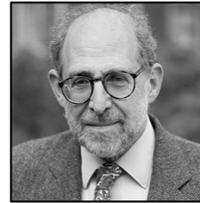
The publication and distribution of the *JTS Parashah Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (z"l) and Harold Hassenfeld (z"l).

To receive *Torah from JTS* by email, visit www.jtsa.edu/torah



Ha'azinu 5780

האזינו תש"ף



This is My Decree

**Dr. Raymond P. Scheindlin, Professor Emeritus
of Medieval Hebrew Literature, JTS**

After surveying the 40 years of wandering in the desert; after reviewing and expanding the laws that God had given the Israelites during that period; and after repeating the terms of the covenant between God and Israel with its promises of a long and prosperous life in their own land if they fulfill God's commands and its threats of impoverishment and expulsion if they fail to fulfill them, Moses now sums up his message in a poem designed to be memorized and recited regularly so that it might easily and reliably be transmitted from generation to generation. The poem, which occupies most of this week's parashah, was intended to be an educational tool. Memorizing it and reciting it would keep the terms of the covenant alive in the minds and hearts of the Israelites forever.

Those of us who attended public school in the 1940s and 1950s were educated at the end of a period that began in prehistoric times with oral literary composition, when people were educated by memorizing things, particularly poetry. Well I remember the panic that would transfix a junior high school class when the teacher announced that she or he was about to call on individual pupils to recite the 20 lines of Tennyson or Macaulay that had been assigned us. The panic was temporary, but the lines that we memorized as children or teenagers were fixed in us permanently. In later life, those lines have sometimes provided a message that we needed to hear or a form of expression for feelings or ideas for which we failed to find words of our own. Likewise in Hebrew school, we were drilled to memorize the prayers and passages from the Bible in Hebrew. Tedious work it may have seemed at the time, but it had the lasting effect of making us comfortable with the Hebrew language and at home among the fundamental texts of the Jewish tradition. An educator with his eye on the future of his people, Moses knew that his poem was more likely to last in the minds of future generations than any abstract enunciations of lofty principles or any class discussion of the pros and cons of the covenant.

Poetry continued to be one of the major forms of Jewish literary activity in later generations as well. Hebrew poets in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages produced a vast quantity of poetry on biblical themes, expanding the stories and laws of the Bible as the authors of the Talmud and Midrash did, but expressing these expansions and elaborations in Hebrew verse. And since Moses spent his last day declaiming and teaching poems (Ha'azinu and the following poem containing Moses's final blessings), it is only appropriate that Moses's last day became the subject of a number of poems composed during this period when Hebrew poetry flourished.

A poem by Pinehas Hakohen, who lived in Tiberias in the eighth century, explores Moses's resistance to the prospect of death by imagining a dialogue between Moses and God.¹ It is a delight to observe this nearly perfect servant of God behaving exactly like one of us ordinary mortals when faced with extinction. Moses has just heard God's command to go up on the mountain on that very day and die, (Deut. 32:48) and he protests:

I will not die! / Why should I die?
O God, just tell me, / What complaint have You with me?

Moses may be the man of God (33:1) who split the sea, stood on Mount Sinai, and shepherded his people through the desert for 40 years, but in these lines he sounds like any one of us in his denial and in his demand for an explanation of the great mystery of death. Confronted with death, Moses is just a man who wants a little more time. He reviews his life, looking for sins for which God may be punishing him, and for each, he offers an explanation or an excuse in hope of a reprieve. "If," he says to God, "you are punishing me for killing the Egyptian who struck an Israelite slave (Exod. 2:12); well, I actually had a good reason for that," and he goes on to offer his excuse. But that excuse is of no interest to God, whose answer, like the decree itself is a riddle:

This is not this. / Why this? Not this!
Go up, Moses and die. / This is My decree.

Stanza by stanza, Moses raises six possible reasons for the decree, and for each he has an excuse or an explanation. God rejects each in turn: None of these acts was actually a sin, and some were even praiseworthy. Each of Moses's protests begins with the opening lines quoted above; each of God's responses ends with His maddening riddle and its unanswerable climax: This is My decree.

We readers might view Moses's list as the things that weigh on his conscience as he reviews his life. He views his death not as the fate of all mankind but as

uniquely *his* fate; he racks his brains seeking a cause in his own behavior and an excuse in his intentions.

With the sixth and last suggestion—his behavior at the rock—Moses comes very close to the truth as the Torah tells it: God sentenced him to die and not enter the Land of Canaan as punishment for his behavior when he was ordered to satisfy the Israelites' thirst by bidding a boulder bring forth water. (Num. 20:2-13) To this item, God replies:

I have sworn and it is inscribed. / For *this* it has been decreed

At last the maddeningly vague word "this" that was repeated so insistently in the refrain has acquired a specific meaning. "This" is the episode of the rock. But we still do not know just what Moses did wrong on that occasion; the text of the Torah is unclear on that point and it is disputed by commentators ancient and modern. Not only does the poet make no attempt to clarify Moses's sin, he seems to taunt Moses—and us readers—by harping on the word "this," and ending with the theme of the divine decree:

Here is this! / Know that it is for this,
For this, Moses, die! / For my decree is that you will die.

We were told all along that Moses will die on account of God's decree, but not why God made the decree. Now, though Moses has at least identified the occasion that brought about the decree, we have only the vaguest idea of the reason.

Every aspect of the composition of the poem until this point is designed to stress that God's decree is God's decree—inscrutable and irreversible. Moses has hit a blank wall. He will never know the reason for his death. And in this respect he is exactly like the rest of mankind. We die for no reason other than God's decree.

Moses now appears to accept this principle, but he is not ready to accept his death, for he has one ambition that is still unfulfilled: to see the Promised Land. In this too he resembles the rest of us. We hate the idea of our own extinction, but our hatred for that inevitability is exacerbated by the thought that we will never know what happens next in the story in which we have participated throughout our lives. What will become of our children and grandchildren? What will become of our city, our language, our country, the world? What technological development is next? What medical discovery? Is God so ungenerous as to deny us even a glimpse of that future?

Moses begins each of the remaining four stanzas with an altered version of the opening lines:

If for this I die, / Let me enter and die!