

Making Every Word Count

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Ha'azinu is remarkable in two respects: what it says, and how it chooses to say it. My focus here will be the latter, but let's note with regard to the former that in this, his final address to the Children of Israel before a set of farewell blessings, Moses reviews all of his people's past, present, and future. He begins by calling on the God who had called Israel into being and called him to God's service. He reminds Israel that God has chosen them and still cares for their well-being. He prophesies that despite all that God and Moses have said and done, Israel will abandon God, as they had in the past. God will punish them, as in the past, but never to the point of utter destruction. In the end, God and Israel will reconcile. Why, Moses pleads, can you not understand the simple truth that YHWH alone is God, YHWH and no other? If you accept that truth and act accordingly, God will save you from your enemies—and if not, not. Remember these words, he concludes, for they are your very life and the length of your days—whereupon, rather peremptorily, God tell Moses that *his days are over*. The time for his words is done. Moses must join the forebears who speak no more ([Deut. 32:46-50](#)).

Throughout the Book of Deuteronomy—the Book of Devarim, of words—Moses has strained to convey a message for which no words, including his, could possibly be adequate. He holds out a promise of a kind of Life, a way called “Mitzvah,” such as the world had never known. How can one describe that which has never been? The words we know cannot measure up to the life we do not know. What does wholeness look like? Who can describe perfect relations to other human beings and to God?

The possibility of that Life ever coming into existence has long depended on Moses's ability to persuade his people to cross the Jordan and start living it. All he has in order to accomplish that is words. God's many miracles have never

succeeded in changing the hearts and minds of Israel for very long, if they worked at all. Moses's striking of the rock to draw water from it—in frustrated recognition that words alone could not do the job assigned him—resulted in the punishment that now prevents him from crossing the Jordan with the people. Moses cannot show them the new Life; it does not exist yet, and in any case, he must remain on the river's far bank. His language will stop exactly where his feet do, and language is all he has.

It should not surprise us, then, that Moses's final plea to Israel to hear his words takes the form of *poetry*, the mode in which words are both most precious and most powerful. The meter of Ha'azinu is fixed. The language is elevated and highly metaphorical. The verses often rhyme. The fact that the Torah reaches its culmination in poetry causes us to reflect on the nature and limits of even these carefully chosen words.

Like any other poet who seeks to construct a bridge between the known world, available to memory and experience, and the as-yet unknown world that exists only in his imagination, Moses falls back on simile and metaphor. He talks about that which has never been experienced by telling what it would be *like*. All through the book, Moses has tried to convince Israel that this unseen Life is, or could be, as real as what they have known: as real as the voice at Sinai, the manna in the wilderness, the repeated salvation from enemies or starvation. He has struggled to convince them of the reality awaiting them on the Jordan's far side by detailing in the most specific terms possible—the law—what their lives and institutions will be like there. Until now, he has employed a poetry of law. That which people everywhere can know—what happens when oxen gore oxen, debts are due, or sacrifices offered—is used to instruct Israel about a sort of Life as yet unknown to anyone.

Now, in Ha'azinu, Moses employs a poetry of nature—that which is most real, tangible, and enduring—and uses metaphors to get his listeners to feel and touch what awaits them. Heaven and earth, rain and dew, rock, honey, the fruit of the field, milk of sheep, the fat of lambs, the blood of grapes, the eagle and her young, the sun, moon, mountains, hills, sea, iron, brass, corn, wine: all the ageless contours of human existence, the basic givens that surround and ground ephemeral and variable history, are invoked to invest the non-yet-experienced with reality.

But even here, despite the wonder and gratitude that Moses's words arouse, language cannot reach its object. The words strain after a richness of reality that they cannot catch. After all, they are only words. "A poem should be palpable and mute," wrote the poet Archibald MacLeish. "Dumb ... Silent ... wordless ... A poem should be equal to: not true ... A poem should not mean / But be." Were poetry able to be that which it "should be," of course, there would be no poetry. Language which is "dumb, silent, wordless" is not language. If Israel could simply and instinctively have seen and known the possibility for themselves that Moses tries to teach—and, really seeing it, had acted to hear the words into being—there would be no need for Deuteronomy, or for the rest of Torah.

That is not life as we know it. We need the words, the metaphors, the teaching, and the law to direct hearing and behavior. And we need them *repeated*, again and again; the danger that repetition will dull our senses is matched by the reality that we do not listen well to what we do not want to hear. Moses's final poem brims over with frustration, disappointment, and perhaps anger. His words are intended as a "witness against" Israel. He has warned them, has done his best to get them to listen. It is as if the nature he invokes has taken its course, despite his best attempts and God's to have things otherwise. "Jeshurun grew fat and kicked; you grew fat and gross and coarse" ([Deut. 32:15](#)). Success will breed complacency and ingratitude, he warns. Blessed by God, Israel will come to take blessing for granted, turn to worship "no-gods," and come to believe that "our own hand has prevailed" (v. 27). It will take disaster to bring them to their senses—or rather, to bring them to realize that there

remain possibilities beyond what the senses, limited by experience, can grasp. In the end, Israel will return to these words and the behavior they bring in tow.

We read Ha'azinu this year right after Yom Kippur, a chance for reflection that we live at our best in the spaces opened by Moses's words: loving, creating, building. This year in particular the power of words to raise or lower us is palpable. They can take us far from the simple truth, and serve the will to power rather than the works of kindness or conscience. Even so, the Torah insists, what we do *can* be adequate to the words Moses offered before he fell silent. One can choose blessing, goodness, Life. Now as ever we can cross narrow rivers, and begin life again on their far side.

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