

This week's column was written by Rabbi Samuel Barth, senior lecturer in Liturgy and Worship, JTS.

### Zichronot (Memories)

In the three great themes of Rosh Hashanah, the encounter with memories (*zichronot*) is nestled between the power of sovereignty (*malchuyot*) and the triumphant, enigmatic sound of the shofar (*shofarot*). *Zichronot* reminds us that each of us is remembered, that our acts are significant, that we come, each of us individually, into the divine presence. In spite of the massive processing power of our machines, there are problems that cannot be solved—even if every computer on earth were to be harnessed in parallel.

Yet we affirm that God is infinite. If this means anything, it means that each of us is noticed, and we can each turn to God not only as Sovereign (for kings and queens appear to ordinary people only in vast assemblies), but as a parent who has time and love for each child. The powerful poem “Unetaneh Tokef” speaks of the *Sefer haZichronot* (Book of Memories) that is opened on Rosh Hashanah, and the new *Mahzor Lev Shalem* offers the translation: “which speaks for itself” (143).

The opening words of the traditional *Zichronot* (160) say (almost reminding us) that God sees all that is hidden and recalls all that might have been forgotten. The text affirms that this “*chok zikaron*” (the “rite of remembrance”) has been established from of old—perhaps a bridge between the biblical name for the day *Yom Hazikkaron* and the rabbinic construction of Rosh Hashanah (unknown in the Bible).

The 10 biblical verses all allude to memories, ending with the tender words of Jeremiah, “Is not Ephraim My dear child whom I remember fondly?” for which there are many haunting melodies.

I also share with you a more creative and contemplative approach to *Zichronot*, which might enrich preparations for Rosh Hashanah or your experience of the day itself. Opening with words by Rabbi Lionel Blue:

We remember a year that is gone with opportunities which can never return. With God's help we try to face our past without excuses or reproach. We consider the good we did and the good we missed; the hurts we endured and the hurts we inflicted. The Book of Memory is still open and the ending is not yet written. We read it in order to repent. (*Days of Awe Machzor*, 235)

Then recite Psalm 90, verse 12, and use those words as a transition into your own silent reflections and meditation. Try to allow at least five minutes (and as much more time as you wish), and then turn to a reflective chant or melody. A *niggun* attributed to Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav has been embraced by many: “Teach us to number our days that we may grow into a heart/mind of wisdom.”

May we grow through our experience during Rosh Hashanah to deepen our love for God, for our families and communities, and for ourselves. May all that we hear and learn in the coming days support us in building a world of peace, joy, learning, and celebration of humanity and all life.

*L'shanah tovah tikateivu vetichateimu* (May we all be written and sealed for a good year).

As always, I am interested in hearing comments and reflections on these thoughts about prayer and liturgy. You may reach me at [sabarh@jtsa.edu](mailto:sabarh@jtsa.edu).

# Torah from JTS

## Ha-azinu 5774

### Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Danielle Upbin, Rabbinic Fellow, JTS Florida Region.

### It's All Torah

Years ago, when I was a student living in the mystical city of Safed in Israel's Northern District, a teacher of mine asked our group of young seekers, “What is the most important book in your life?” Many of us spent hours studying various books and reference materials, Jewish and non-Jewish alike. How then could one book be the most important out of the many?

Suspecting we knew the answer that would please our teacher, we replied practically in unison, “The Bible!” Turns out he'd asked a trick question. Our teacher's intention in making this basic inquiry, we later learned, was to inspire us to think more deeply and globally about how we live, what we value, and how we spend our time.

When Moses delivered his final words to the congregation of Israel, perhaps he had a similar intent. Upon completing the recitation of Ha-azinu, a complex poem reflecting the Israelites' history and destiny, the following injunction is offered:

Moses . . . recited *all* the words of this poem in the ears of the people. And when Moses finished reciting *all* these words to *all* of Israel, he said to them: Take to heart to 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. (Deut. 32:44–47)

What is striking about this passage is the repeated use of the word *all* (*kol*). Certainly, the poetry of Ha-azinu tells an encompassing story, but it hardly represents the totality of the Israelite experience. The repetition of *all*, then, points the reader beyond the confines of our immediate experience of the text. The Rabbis of the Talmud recognized this when they commented that the phrase “*All* the words of this poem” (*kol divrei hashira hazot*) refers to the whole Torah, not just the final poem (Nedarim 38a). Just as a poem requires the reader to deconstruct, analyze, hypothecate, and appreciate, so too the poem that is the Torah also calls out to us to engage with it all.

“*Simu levavchem*” (Take to heart / Pay attention), Moses declares, because the tools you

need for a long and meaningful life are contained in these teachings. Like any precious material, however, it needs to be “mined.” On this passage, the French medieval commentator Rashi quotes the rabbinic dictum, “The words of Torah are as ‘mountains hanging by a hair’” (*Chagigah* 10a). This enticing visual metaphor suggests that the study of Torah requires delicate concentration and full focus. It invites us to probe, make sense of, and apply the wisdom we find there.

When we study Torah deeply, we are like the witness to the mountains, not daring to pull our eyes away from this spectacular site for fear of missing something. The beauty of Torah study is that we are called upon to bring our whole being, all of our life experience, and all of our intellect to unravel its mysteries and apply its teachings to the present day.

But the forceful use of the word *all* in Moses’s teaching suggests that while the study of Torah is of value in and of itself, the application of Torah to our daily lives is the essential point. Rabbi Ze’ev Wolf of Zhitomir, an early Hasidic master, taught, “The essence of what we accomplish in our Torah study and prayer depends on our actions in the world” (*Ohr Ha’meir* on Parashat Eikev). Moses’s final words indicate that the study of Torah was never meant to be an activity we merely do as an aside. It *is* the activity of life—be it mundane or intricate—that permeates everything we do. Whether we’re doing the dishes or closing a business deal, the Rabbis warn us: don’t take your eyes off the mountain. Live Torah fully. Be mindful of a path that is present and passionate.

Certainly, we are enjoined to set aside time to study so that we can gain the knowledge of our text and traditions. But, if that study doesn’t lead to living an informed life, then the teaching becomes a trifle, or literally an empty thing (*d’var reik*). “For this is not a trifling thing for you: it is your very life” (*ki lo dv’ar rayk hu mekem; ki hu chayeichem*): all the world is a stage for Torah. It is found in conversations, editorials, art, and music.

A true story: a rabbinic colleague of mine was once questioned by the IRS for including the theatrical trade paper *Variety* in his tax deductions. The rabbi responded, “Do you know how many good sermons I have gotten out of that paper!?” I am not sure how much the tax man appreciated that, but the point is that Torah is everywhere, or at least, to paraphrase a well-known Hasidic teaching, “wherever we let Torah in!”

This, then, is the lesson gleaned from my teacher in Safed. Is the answer to the “most important book” question “The Holy Bible”? No. Not necessarily.

The most important book, he suggested, was not our book of laws, but our book of days. Today he might say our “calendar app.” What we choose to do with our time and with whom we choose to spend it informs the very character of our lives and the length of our days. Moses’s final words do not dictate that we spend every moment studying Torah, but that in every moment we allow the Torah to resonate.

May we be blessed to welcome this New Year with the intention to make it all Torah all the time; to fill our days with Torah and teach it through our actions to the next generation, thereby fulfilling the command to “enjoin them upon our children that they may observe faithfully all the terms of this teaching.”

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## A Taste of Torah

**A commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS.**

### Finding God and Ourselves Anew

During the 10 days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we devote ourselves to the process of repentance, attempting to tip the balance in our favor as we approach the Day of Atonement. The Sabbath in between the two holidays is known as Shabbat Shuvah, the Sabbath of Return; and Shabbat Shuvah is considered an auspicious time to reflect on this sacred endeavor. It would seem that the Torah reading this week reinforces this notion, reminding us of earlier, harmonious days in our relationship with God (Deut. 32:7), and of days marred by our collective wayward behavior (32:15–16). We, indeed, seek a closer, more intimate relationship with God and our fellow humans, and so hope that “our days will be renewed as of old.”

About half way through Moses’s poem of Parashat Ha-azinu, he describes God’s response to Israelite disloyalty:

The Lord saw and was vexed and spurned His sons and daughters. God said, “I will hide My countenance from them, and see how they fare in the end. For they are a treacherous breed, children with no loyalty in them.” (Deut. 32:19–20)

How are we to understand the expression about hiding the Divine Face?

Nahmanides (Ramban) clarifies two very important and seemingly contradictory points. First, when God makes this threat, Ramban explains that God says it either to Himself or to the ministering angels—not to the People. That is to say, God knows well that the divine anger and threat should not preclude the process of *teshuvah* (repentance) and repair of relationships. Verbalizing such a destructive message directly to the People will lead to a sense of futility. Second, Nahmanides goes on to explain that the meaning of this notion of “hiding” is that the People will go out to seek God, but ultimately fail in their search. In this instance, God’s quality of justice and desire for vengeance seems to overwhelm God’s desire for mercy.

Every year, we are given the gift of finding God anew. And while our previous track record may discourage God from opening the door, it should not deflate us and our attempts to open the door to repentance. Even when it seems we have drifted quite a distance from our divine source, the possibility of returning is within reach. God may continue to hide the divine presence, but we need to be firm in “knocking harder.” Our persistence will awaken God’s quality of mercy. May our *teshuvah*, *tzedakah* (charity), and *tefillah* (prayer) all diminish the severity of the decree and lead to a revealing of the Divine Countenance.

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