



Torah from JTS

Parashat Ha-azinu 5775 / 2014

Shabbat Shuvah

About halfway through Moses's poem of Parashat Ha-azinu, he describes God's response to Israelite disloyalty. God is portrayed as "hiding the Divine face": "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 this expression?

Ramban (Moses Nahmanides) writes, "God said, 'I will hide My countenance from them, and see how they fare in the end . . . ' that is, God said in His heart, or to the angels. And this expression of hiding God's countenance means that when they will seek Me, they will not find Me." For Ramban, there are 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 relationship. Verbalizing such a destructive message directly to the people would 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) both diminish the severity of the decree and lead to a revealing of the Divine countenance.

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THE JTS PARASHAH COMMENTARY

By Rabbi Joel A. Alter, Director of Admissions, The Rabbinical School and H. L. Miller Cantorial School and College of Jewish Music, JTS

On This Very Day

It's difficult to overstate the pathos of Moshe's last days. This man (and he is most assuredly a man, not a god, not a saint), who never wanted to be a leader—and after his first, impulsive attempt at leading was met with contempt from those he tried to save and condemnation from Pharaoh, his adoptive father (Exod. 2:11–15)—carried the burdens of prophetic leadership with fierce loyalty to both of his masters, God and the people. Even as agent for miracle upon miracle, and even though he articulated against all odds God's vision of blessing, holiness, and justice to a nation struggling badly to shake off its physical and spiritual bonds, he never won the battle for the Israelites' trust in God nor in himself. Yet this man would die with his final (and possibly only) wish explicitly denied. God granted him permission to view the Promised Land from a height, but not to set foot upon it.

While Moshe records in Deuteronomy 3:26 that God angrily told him He would countenance no further pleas to enter the Land ("But the LORD was wrathful with me . . . [and] said to me, 'Enough! Never speak to Me of this matter again!'", God finds cause in this week's parashah to remind Moshe once more *why* He will not permit him to enter the Land, even as He commands him to ascend Mount Nebo where he will view it and then die (Deut. 32:51). Nothing in the Torah's telling suggests that God treats Moshe with anything but care and even generous compassion as He escorts him to his death. The midrash poignantly expands this understanding, telling how God withdraws from Moshe the breath of life with a gentle kiss (BT Bava Batra 17a). Holding firmly to the decree that Moshe must not enter the Land, while granting him an extraordinary view of it from the mountain's summit, God has reconciled with Moshe. And we pray that Moshe, though desiring life to the very last, is reconciled with God.

But what of Moshe and his people? Are they reconciled as Moshe utters his parting words and begins his final ascent? I worried about this as I read our parashah's closing paragraphs. At 32:47, Moshe exhorts the people (he's forever exhorting them) to follow the Torah devotedly, pressing the point by saying, "[The Torah] is not a trifling [lit., empty] thing for you: it is your very life." Even now, does Moshe have to caution the people in such stark terms

not to treat the Torah indifferently? Have they no baseline of loyalty on which he can rely so that he may die in peace? The people's record is poor.

In the next verse, the Torah reports that God commands Moshe to ascend Mount Nebo "that very day." Why is it significant that God's command comes "that very day?" From a literary perspective, it heightens the drama. Moshe has spoken his final words to his people and so has concluded his task on earth. It is time for him to go. Fulfillment of God's promise—the people's entering the Land under Joshua's leadership—cannot go forward as long as Moshe remains alive. In its fashion, the midrash takes instruction from the two other instances in Torah in which the phrase "*be'etzem hayom hazeh*" (that very day) appears. Rashi brings this wonderful midrash, from the collection called Sifrei, to our attention. The first parallel comes from the Noah story: "On that very day, Noah . . . entered into the Ark" (Gen. 7:13). The second is on the night of the Exodus: "On that very day, God took the Israelites out of Egypt" (Exod. 12:51). What prompted God in each instance to act so decisively?

Midrash Sifrei 337 explains that Noah's evil contemporaries were so incensed by his ark that they swore that if they witnessed Noah so much as move toward it to make his escape (confirming and commencing their doom), they would block him and violently smash the ark to bits. Defying them, God brought Noah into the ark then and there, "on that very day." Similarly, on the eve of the Exodus, the Egyptians swore they'd not only block the Israelites' escape, but slaughter them on the spot. Defying the Egyptians, God brought the Israelites out of Egypt then and there, "on that very day." As Moshe's death approaches, the Israelites swear that they will not let Moshe leave them. One imagines them stationing themselves at every trailhead leading up to Mount Nebo.

"This man who brought us out of Egypt, and split the sea for us, and brought down manna for us, and harvested quail for us, and raised up the well for us, and gave us the Torah, we will not let him go" (ibid.). Defying them, God decides to bring Moshe in (!) then and there, in broad daylight, "on that very day."

What an analogy: in refusing to give Moshe leave to die, the people are akin to the miserable generation of the Flood and the woeful Egyptians at the Exodus. Are the Israelites wicked when they protest, "No! We won't let you die!?" Does God take Moshe from them out of spite?

If we read the people's recitation of the miracles Moshe has wrought as a catalog of perks that come with Moshe's leadership like that of a wealthy spouse grouching about the material comforts at stake in a divorce, then yes, we might say that the Israelites are wicked to the end. "Let Moshe go? Not a chance. Who'll bring home the quail?"

If, though, we read their protest as an 11th-hour confession of the blessing of Moshe's life, of his generosity, devotion, and steadfastness, then God's command that Moshe begin his ascent *be'etzem hayom hazeh* comes at the perfect time. The protest is a remarkable about-face for a people who previously accused Moshe of having brought them *up from* a land of milk and honey with the evil intent of killing them in the barren wilderness (Num. 16:13). But now they trust in Moshe and in God, as they did once before and never since, at the instant of the crossing of the sea (Exod. 14:31). Just now God will take Moshe from them, for Moshe, a mere mortal, must die like everyone else before they backslide into faithlessness, as they inevitably will.

We read Parashat Ha-azinu on Shabbat Shuvah, the 11th hour of Shabbatot. The new year has already begun and Yom Kippur is quickly bearing down. The anxious undercurrent of the entire High Holiday season plays to the strains of the *piyyut* (liturgical poem) *U-netaneh Tokef*, with which we face the inevitability and mystery of our own mortality. Let us take guidance, then, from our ancestors, and confess now to all who have been gracious toward us, who have sustained us with their kindnesses and supported us steadfastly in spite of our resistance and resentments, that we are deeply grateful to them and that we cannot imagine our lives without them. Tell God, tell one another, *be'etzem hayom hazeh*. On this very day.

Shabbat shalom and *gemar hatimah tovah*.

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A TASTE OF TORAH

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Teshuvah: Seeking the Hidden Face of God

This coming Shabbat, the Sabbath between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, is known as *Shabbat Shuvah*, the "Sabbath of Return." 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 Shabbat in between 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 (Deut. 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" (Lam. 5:21).