

For educators, this abyss is incredible exasperating. Teaching by definition relies on close connections, on creating relationships, and on seeing and being seen. With all the advancement of technology, teaching through Zoom is hardly a satisfactory replacement. I long for the day I can sit in the classroom with my students, studying with them as we all did for many years. I miss my students and I miss the interaction with people around me.

And as we approach this holiday season, I pray that crossing the abyss and returning to normalcy is just around the corner. I want to wish you much health, safety, and happiness, and may the day when we can once again celebrate together with families and friends arrive soon.

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האזינו תשפ"א



The Poetics of Loss

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Growing up, books were always present in our house, arranged by topic in large bookshelves. Arieli Press, an Israeli fine arts publishing company, was founded in 1922 by my grandfather, Yosef Arieli (z"l), a master printer and an author. My father, Ariel Arieli (z"l), and extended family were all involved in the printing business in some capacity. Printing has been regarded as a way to disseminate knowledge in a democratic way and it has been especially precious to the Jewish people who believed that spreading knowledge is *Avodat Kodesh*—holy work, akin to Moshe teaching Torah on *Har Sinai*.

In addition to many museum catalogues, books of great Israeli artists, photography books commemorating the wars and celebrating Israel's achievements, Arieli Press frequently printed poetry books in memory of soldiers killed in the many wars Israel fought with its neighbors. Growing up, I read these emotionally difficult books, filled with writing by the fallen soldiers and their families and friends, and through them learned to appreciate the succinct yet expressive language of poetry. I was, therefore, eager to explore the specific command given to Moshe by God to address the people of Israel this last time with a poem.

In the previous Torah portion, Moshe is instructed by God to speak to the people of Israel: "Therefore, write down this poem and teach it to the people of Israel; put it in their mouths, in order that this poem may be My witness against the people of Israel" (Deut. 31:19).

Moshe not only addresses the people of Israel in the poem, he chooses to direct his last verses to heaven, and earth, making his speech powerful and eternal as the first verse of the portion claims: "Give ear, O heavens, let me

“speak; Let the earth hear the words I utter!” (Deut. 31:1). According to Hizkuni, Rabbi Hezekiya ben Manoah, a 13th-century rabbi, Moshe calls the forces of nature to witness his last address before his death to give it additional power and alludes to the story of creation. He continues with the retelling of the history of his relationship with the people of Israel since becoming their leader. Moshe summarizes God’s justice and compassion, and the failings of the Israelites. He touches upon both the punishment the Israelites will face and their ultimate redemption.

Why does God ask Moshe to reiterate the relationship between God and Israel, for the last time, in a form of a poem? What is the power of poetry? The 18th-century Hasidic rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev believed that songs are an integral part of all religious service. He argued that singing makes Torah not only close to one’s heart but also unforgettable. Poems can be more powerful and memorable than prose and at the same time more accessible and retainable. The 19th-century commentator Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (the Netziv) emphasizes the richness of poetic language. The vibrancy and resonance of a poem come from the way it is written; with few words and intricate syntax, the speaker can say much more than in prose. The Netziv adds that poetry forces the reader to dive deeply into the written verses and discover allusions, hidden meanings, and connections.

Moshe’s poetic language in Ha’azinu inspired other artists to compose their own poems citing its verses. In 1937, a soviet poet and lyricist, Vasili Ivanowitz, and Dimitri Pokras, a composer, refer to the metaphor of God as an eagle protecting a Jewish army fighting against the Nazis by spreading his wings and protecting them from all evil. A more recent arrangement for verse 13 “He fed him honey from the crag, And oil from the flinty rock” composed by Gil Aldema, a neighbor of my family’s in Givata’im, became a popular song still heard in camps, religious services and performed by dance troupes all over the world.

Another notable example is the poem *Mineged* (“From Afar”) by the beloved Hebrew poet Rachel Bluwstein (1890–1931). Rachel suffered from tuberculosis and was forced to relinquish her dream of building Kibbutz Degania; she moved to Tel Aviv where she eventually succumbed to the illness. In *Mineged*, she invokes the dramatic and tragic end of the Torah portion when Moshe is instructed by God to climb up the Nevo Mountain and look at the vast Land of Israel, all the while knowing that he will never

cross the river to reach the promised land. “Ascend these heights of Abarim to Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab facing Jericho, and view the land of Canaan, which I am giving the Israelites as their holding” (Deut. 32:49). In Rachel’s poem, standing on Nevo becomes a symbol for her own unfulfilled yearnings and a metaphor for the essential human experience of loss and shattered expectations.

Rachel refers to the same wings mentioned in Moshe’s poem, but for her, these wings are bringing neither help nor hope. She is standing on one shore, lonely and deperate. Moshe and Rachel are mourning the future they will never experience: Rachel will never return to Degania and will never see the Kinneret (Lake of Galilee) she loves so much. Moshe will never cross the Jordan river and will never enter the promised land. They both experience defeat.

Attentive the heart. The ear listening:
Is anyone coming?
Every expectation contains
the sadness of Nevo.

One facing the other—two shores
Of a single river.
The rock of fate:
Ever far apart.

Spread your wings. See from afar
There—no one is coming,
To each his own Nevo
In a land of plenty.

As I read the poem this year, I cannot avoid thinking about the tragic situation that overwhelms us today, living during a pandemic and suffering the effects of COVID-19. We are all sheltering in place, nostalgic for the lives we used to live. Contemplating the lives we had to abandon is our Nevo. We lost the lives we used to lead and our future is, right now, unimaginable. There is a cliff of separation between our current lives and the lives we lead. As we are going into the beginning of the school year and the holidays season, we face huge deviations from our regular practices; we are also looking at a future that holds many secrets and surprises. Our beloved routines will never be the same and the future is obscure.