

Ha'azinu
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This parsha is always the last one read on Shabbat in the annual cycle – the rest of the Torah is read only on Simchat Torah – and so, much as the Israelites in the story, we are left with this as the concluding, culminating message from the Torah, G_d and Moses.

This parsha does not exactly end the Torah cycle on a high note, except maybe in terms of literary style. The poem is damning in many ways, and the parsha closes on the sadly poignant note of Moses' own punishment – able to see the land, but not enter it.

The question I'm going to leave us with is: Is this what we need, what we want for that final message? Do we need this “song” at all?

The redactors who assembled the Torah clearly thought we did. Scholars view this poem as older than the rest of Deuteronomy, perhaps by centuries. It survived through all the vicissitudes of pre-Biblical history and was placed at this pivotal point in the text.

Certainly the language in it, its drive and force, and its striking images remain powerful, even riveting. The poem overwhelms us. But it is a harsh and bitter, terrifying and even terrorizing piece of work. Yes, it ends with a promise of redemption but to me that sounds almost half-hearted, and entirely unearned. Redemption in the poem is just another violent exercise of power by a jealous G_d. And redemption comes to prove that G_d keeps promises, not because of any change of behavior on the part of the people. It's mostly to prevent G_d's embarrassment.

Reading the song today, it struck me as the Biblical equivalent of Trump's infamous “American Carnage” speech – except Ha'azinu at least blames the people hearing it, not some scapegoated “other.”

That sense is perhaps intensified because we hear the speech as coming from Moses. We're told in the previous parsha that it was dictated by G_d, but the delivery of the speech is not interrupted by any “The Lord spoke to Moses, saying” or words like that. And the speech does sound like it could be the rant of an embittered, frustrated old leader who has grave doubts about how his followers will behave without him.

It reminded me of a stanza from W.H. Auden's poem “Law Like Love”:

“Law is the wisdom of the old,
“The impotent grandfathers feebly scold;
“The grandchildren put out a treble tongue,
“Law is the senses of the young.”

And hearing the parsha during the Days of Awe, we are struck by the ways it seems clangingly out of tune with much of the liturgy and readings for the High Holidays (even if it shares some underlying themes).

Compare the tone of Ha'azinu with, for example, the beautiful haftarah from Jeremiah we read on the second day of Rosh HaShanah. Yes, in Jeremiah, too, G_d has exiled the Jews because of their evil. But the chapter begins after that, with beautiful expressions of grief and of forgiveness, and with warm love for the people, embraced as "Ephraim," G-d's "first-born." There is a sense of understanding, and acknowledgement of repentance – the people feel guilty for the sins of their youth.

And of course, the holiday liturgy is filled with professions of G_d's willingness to forgive and with visions of a better future, not of inevitable decline. Even Biblical passages are abbreviated to eliminate their harsher prophecies, as in the "Adonai, Adonai" we recite numerous times.

But maybe that's the point. Judaism is a religion of tensions and balances, and perhaps we read Ha'azinu this week – need Ha'azinu this week – precisely as a counterpoint to the rest of what we're hearing.

Ha'azinu underscores G_d's judgment, as the High Holidays emphasize G_d's mercy. And while we want to be buoyed by hope for the future, we can't deny that nations fall. Ha'azinu's prophecy of a people becoming fat and happy – the image of "fatness" appears several times – forsaking their principles and bringing about their own destruction is not one easy to shrug off or ignore, maybe especially now.

So how do we respond, viscerally and intellectually, to hearing Ha'azinu right now? Is its message necessary? Is its tone effective? How do we integrate it into our thoughts during the Days of Awe?