

Breaking the Cycle

Ha'azinu 5781

The Song of Ha'azinu, which serves as a kind of an epilogue to the Torah, offers a brief primer on all of Jewish history. It details the Divine blessings which were bestowed upon the Jewish people in the early stages of our national relationship with the Almighty. It continues on to discuss the pathology of complacency which we developed in those years of plenty, and the degree to which that complacency undermined our relationship with our Father in heaven, resulting in Divine withdrawal (*bester panim*) and terrible national suffering. Finally, the song concludes with Divine vengeance upon the enemies of the Jewish people, and the restoration of our collective relationship with God.

The trajectory outlined in Ha'azinu highlights the degree to which self-satisfied complacency is a spiritual threat. In fact, much of Sefer Devarim warns against this phenomenon, in which we take credit for our success, and forget that God is our ultimate protector and provider. We reflexively assume that we are to be congratulated for our material bounty, and leave God out of things unless something has gone wrong. At that point, when tragedy strikes, we beseech him for help, and wonder why He is allowing unpleasant events to transpire in our lives.

The Torah assures us that God, in His infinite compassion, will hear us even then, when we cry for Him out of distress. Yet, one cannot help but notice, one of the major points Moshe tried to emphasize throughout his final address to the Jewish people was warning against this terribly unhealthy cycle of spiritual complacency in times of plenty, followed by suffering and moments of intensive spiritual crisis.

To the very best extent of our ability, we must try to internalize the message of Sefer Devarim, and attempt to avoid the trap of spiritual complacency in our own times. Rather than turning to God only in moments of distress and crisis, we must attempt to make ever increasing room for Him in our lives, especially when things are going well. We must see His guiding hand in whatever happiness and success we enjoy, be it familial, personal, or professional.

There is no doubt that this is an extremely difficult spiritual task, which challenges our instinctive response of self-congratulation. Yet, were it not of the utmost importance, it is most unlikely that Moshe would have emphasized this message to the degree that He did in his last moments of contact with the Jewish people. We would be wise to heed our great teacher's message.