

Parashat Ha'Azinu is the 53rd weekly Torah portion in our annual cycle. It's always read on the Shabbat between Rosh Hasahana and Sukkot. Named for the very first word in the parsha, Ha"Azinu, literally means "lend an ear" or "listen" when speaking to more than one person.

Nearly the entire reading today consists of a 70-line song delivered by Moses to the Israelites on the last day of his earthly life. (I know we have been saying good-bye to Moses for awhile now...but this is *really* it.) In the Torah, the words of this parsha are structured in a distinctive two-column format which reflects the poetic nature of this text, known as Shirat Haazinu or the Song of Moses. Within his parting words, Moses words will deliver three things: an indictment of the Israelites' sins over the past 40 years, a prophecy of their punishment, and finally, a promise of God's ultimate redemption.

As an interesting aside, the Rabbis of old counted 10 songs in all of Torah. Few, and special, they are kind of an ancient Hebrew "top 10 list". One is the song the Israelites were instructed to recite at the first Passover in Egypt, a hymn of Thanksgiving. The second is the Song of the Sea sung by our ancestors after safely passing through the Sea of Reeds and realizing in jubilation they were finally free. Another of the songs was sung by the Israelites at the well in the wilderness. These are songs of survival. The fourth is the Song of Moses, today's parsha, literally a swan song. We are told that Moses, along with the new leader Joshua, came and spoke all the words of this song into the ears of the people. A fifth song, the Song of David, is today's haftorah portion. In it, the prophet

Samuel reminds the Israelites of G-d's faithfulness in defending His people and in delivering David from his enemies. This is a song of praise.

Interestingly, the last song counted is remarkable in that it's to be sung in the time to come. It is alluded to in Psalm 140, and also by Isaiah in chapter 42 when he says "Sing to the Lord a new song and His praise *from the end of the earth.*" That tune should be quite something.

Rabbi Mendel Kalmenson questions why the very last request G-d made of Moses would be to write a song. Isn't the timing a bit off? Surely, Moses had lots of other things to do on his last living day, yet in his final hours, he's commissioned by G-d to write and teach music to the Israelites. The Rabbi offers this explanation: Devoted servant of G-d that he was, and though delivering a message that was at times dire and stern, the last memory Moses leaves his beloved people is of him singing, not preaching, the word of G-d. With his last words still singing in their ears, they will watch Moses ascend Mount Nebo on his final mission, to return his holy soul to its Maker. The scene is powerful, the soundtrack moving, and the lesson profound. On that memorable day, Moses and Joshua together, face our people, one to bid farewell and the other to say hello, and together sing the duet called "Ha'Azinu," redefining for all time how Torah will be perceived, not as a sermon, but as a song. He views Ha'Azinu as a code word for the entire Torah, which, like any good song, the people won't be able to get it out of their system". My thoughts are that 1) a poetic song is a way to make Moses' last words stand out from all the other words he has spoken, and 2) singing can soften a frightening situation, or the foretelling of bad news. In fact, It's hard to stay in a bad mood when you're singing. When I used to be annoyed with my husband,

I'd tell him I would forgive him if he could sing the whole song Moon River to me in a very romantic, serious manner. It always worked.

Commentary points out that today's parsha is filled with images of G-d: G-d circling, guarding, and carrying the Israelites as an eagle would its young, G-d as a rock—steady, faithful, and perfect, G-d as a father—one who created and made us. And feminine images of God as well, like "God set the people atop the highlands, to feast on the yield of the earth; *nursing* them with honey from the crag and oil from the flinty rock. I read it is from these words that Rabbi Lawrence Kushner's took the title of his book of Jewish Mysticism, *Honey from the Rock*.

One last image from this parsha. Near the beginning, Moses calls upon *heaven and earth* to hear his words, and asks that his speech be like rain and dew for the grass. The great Torah commentator Rashi explained that Moses is asking heaven and earth to serve as witnesses in case Israel ever denies accepting the covenant. Moses knew he was mortal and would soon die, but that heaven and earth would endure forever. Furthermore, said Rashi, through these witnesses G-d could intervene. if Israel acted righteously, then the witnesses, the earth would yield its produce and the heavens would give its dew. But if Israel acted sinfully, G-d would close off heaven's rain, and the soil would yield no produce.

In his last words, Moses tells the people to take his warnings to heart and to faithfully adhere to G-d's teachings, for it is their very life that is at stake in this new land. The parshah concludes with G-d telling Moses to ascend Mount Nebo and view the land of Canaan. He will die on the mountain, as his brother Aaron had died on Mount Hor, for the sin they had

committed in the wilderness of Zin, when they disobeyed G-d's instructions and struck the rock to produce water. Rabbi Heidi Cohen points out that Moses imparts not just the memories of the past forty years, but also of their earlier history, to remind the people they carry with them into the Land of Israel, the words, history, and blessings bestowed upon them since the time of Abraham and Sarah. The journey to the Promised Land has not been easy, and the future holds its own set of challenges. Moses has reached the end of his days and today's parsha is his ethical will. In the end his greatest hope is likely the same as ours. That his children have listened and learned from him, and are now ready to begin the next step in their journey. We are living proof that their behavior will affect all generations to come.

Perhaps you, like me, have caught yourself saying the same things to your children your parents said to you. I'm going to Florida next weekend to see my little *granddaughter* and a few days ago I said to my daughter Lauren, "I can't wait to get there because now Lewcy is talking so much and we can have a real conversation!" Soon after I hung up the phone I was flooded with a stored memory of *my* father saying to me "I can't wait to be with Lauren this summer, now that she's 3 years old we'll really be able to have fun together." That was 32 years ago. Our words seem to echo through the generations and when they are good words, they forge a link that is meaningful and beautiful. It also helps when the timing is just right. A few weeks ago my son Josh also had a baby (not by himself). For years Josh has known that when that he was born his Dad wrote him a letter about what being a new father meant to him and all that he wished for his new baby boy. Josh never really asked to see it. But right after the baby

was born he called me. “*Mom, Where’s that letter dad wrote? I want to write one like it to Bastian and hang them up together in his room.*” I felt like Maggie Smith in *The Second Best Marigold Hotel* when she speaks about Sonny who is like a son to her...”He sometimes gets it wrong, she tells us, but never when it counts. And when he gets it right, well it’s a wonder to behold.” Moses passionately hopes what we all hope ...that we’ve taught our children well and that they will replay our words when they need them most.

After the Torah summary and commentary, I usually choose an idea from the parsha that is relevant to for our modern day lives. But today I am doing just the opposite. I decided to chose a topic I think is important for a brand new year and then figure out a way to relate it back to the parsha. And really, over the last two weeks Sheri has magnificently presented us with so many life wonderful ideas: redefining priorities, letting go of old baggage, seeing G-d within each other, offering a meaningful apology, advanced care planning to take care of ourselves and our loved ones, and writing ethical wills to share our values and offer guidance. Yet, amazingly, I can add a topic not yet unexplored. It’s a common feeling, but one that takes ongoing nurturing to blossom into an everyday companion: *Gratitude*.

Gratitude is defined as “a thankful feeling for what an individual has received, whether tangible or intangible”. It’s the realization that we have goodness in our lives and that that goodness comes at least partially from *outside of us*. For this reason, gratitude helps us connect to something larger than ourselves...be it another person, nature or a higher power.

When we are given a wonderful present or a compliment, it's easy to feel grateful. The trick is to look at life in such a way that we ongoingly see, even among the everyday clutter, both great and small things for which to be thankful. You know those books where you stare at a crowded picture and try to find the apple or the cat or Waldo? Well, life is the picture. And sometimes we have to look hard for the hidden blessings. On the nights when I say prayers, I always feel I should thank G-d for what I've been given before asking for what I want. Sadly, after a particularly frustrating or worrisome day, sometimes I can't easily think of much to be grateful for. But I've found if I just keep going, one small good thing reminds me of another, and then another, and pretty soon I'm feeling like a lucky lady.

You don't have to take my word for it. There's actually a science of gratitude, and the benefits of gratitude have been scientifically proven. The Harvard Mental Health Letter explains that expressing thanks may be one of the simplest ways to feel better and stay healthier. In a formal study, several people were asked to write down every day a list of things they were grateful for. A second group was asked to write down their daily irritations. After 10 weeks, those who wrote about things they appreciated, were more measurably optimistic, felt better about their lives, exercised more, and visited the doctor less. Why? Because gratitude allows us to appreciate what we have, instead what we lack, to enjoy what is in front of us, rather than always reaching for something new in the hopes it will make us happy. Like a muscle, gratitude grows stronger when it's exercised often. Sending thank you notes, counting blessings, meditating and praying, all cultivate gratitude.

Dr. Emma Seppala of Stanford University, reviews additional studies which suggest that we humans are much more likely to pay attention to and remember negative situations, criticisms, or losses, than positive events, praise or gains. It's been shown that when something wonderful happens to us (a new car, a promotion, a new relationship), although we do get a tremendous *initial* boost of happiness, we quickly become accustomed to these things and the happiness subsides. If we don't consciously remind ourselves to continuously appreciate our blessings, we can easily stop noticing them, which is why we often tend to be most grateful for something after it's gone. Too often illness makes us appreciate health, or a move to a new town makes us yearn for our old friends and neighbors. Dr. Seppala also states that counting our blessings gives us a reality check. *If we're alive, chances are a great many things are working in our favor.* In general, we have the choice to focus on what's wrong or smile at what's right. This may not change the difficult situation, *but it will change us.* It will empower us to shift our experience of a moment, or a day, or a lifetime by focusing on our blessings.

So...how can we relate feeling grateful to today's torah and haftorah readings? Well, I'm no Bible expert, but I would venture to say it would be hard to find two Jews of any time period who appreciated Judaism, felt G-d's blessings, or were more moved to praise and revere G-d than Moses and David. It has been said that blessings often show up in unrecognizable disguises. I think this was true for Moses. Though this last day is draped in death, Moses knows he has completed the life mission he chose to accept, he saw it through to the end and he did well. Realizing our life's purpose and fulfilling our destiny would bring most of us gratitude of the highest

order when our time has come. Earning a place in the history of his people second to none, is an awesome reward. Melody Beattie, author of self help books, describes gratitude in a way that helps us see what's at stake if we don't embrace it: *"Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos to order, confusion to clarity. Gratitude is what makes a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend. It makes sense of our past, brings peace to today, and creates a vision for tomorrow."* That we are even here is a testimony to the fact that Moses created a vision for tomorrow. Oprah Winfrey once said: *"Ha'Azinu! (Listen!) The more you praise and celebrate your life, the more there is in life to celebrate."* Okay she didn't really start with Ha'Azinu but she did say the rest and everyone listens to Oprah.

There is a prayer in the back of our Shabbat Siddur called "For These We Give Thanks". In it we thank G-d for the miraculous gifts we always have but seldom think to appreciate: the power to grow, to choose, to hope, to love, the urge to be more than we are, the ability to create things of beauty and to rise above disappointment, failure and bereavement, the possibility of cherishing others, the opportunity to mend our ways and find renewal.

I will close with a thank you note...to you. I was in Seattle for Rosh HaShana this year and attended services at a very nice congregation. The words, prayers and facility were lovely, the crowd was big and the honeycake was great. But when it was over, and I looked around, there was no one to hug, no grown children I had taught in the 7th grade, no Beth Shalom tuna. It wasn't nearly as good, because, while I'm certain G-d was there, YOU weren't. So, thank you for the source of security, camaraderie,

and love we are for each other. Thanks for sharing your stories with me, for turning friendship into family. Thank you for giving me an experience of Judaism that is much more meaningful than I could have ever created on my own. I am so grateful for Beth Shalom and for you.

This year may we each seek reasons to be grateful, more deeply appreciate those we hold dear, and, like Moses, accomplish our most noble goals.

Shabbat Shalom.