

Parshat Ha'azinu – Shabbat Shuva

September 26, 2020 – 8 Tishrei 5781

Annual (Deuteronomy 32:1-32:52): Hertz p. 896

Haftarah: Hosea 14:2 – 10; Joel 2:15-27; Micah 7:18-20 (Hertz p. 891, 893, 892)

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Torah Portion Summary

Moshe recites the poem that God had instructed him to write down and teach to the people. It begins with words of moral teaching contrasting the virtue of God to the wickedness of Israel. It goes on to tell of God's goodness to Israel, Israel's prosperity and rebellion, and God's punishment for its breaking the covenant. Finally, the poem recounts God's mercy, promising that God will save His people from their enemies. Moshe reads the poem to the people and warns them to take it to heart. God tells Moshe to ascent Mount Nebo. From that place, he will be allowed to look over at the Promised Land before he dies.

I. Give ear, O heavens, let me speak; let the earth hear the words I utter! (Deuteronomy 32:1)

1. Why the heavens and the earth? Rabbi Tanchuma said: Because God will redeem Israel only through the agency of them both, for so it is written, "Shout, O heavens, for the Lord has acted; shout aloud, O depths of the earth!" (Isaiah 44:23). Another explanation: Why the heavens and the earth? For the Torah was given only through the agency of them both, as it is said, "From the heavens He let you hear His voice to discipline you; on earth He let you see His great fire" (Deuteronomy 4:36). Another explanation: Because the manna and the quails were given through the agency of them both, as it is said, "I will rain down bread for you from the sky" (Exodus 16:4); and the quails from the earth, as it is written, "In the evening quail came up" (Exodus 16:13). Another explanation: Because God compared Israel to the stars of heaven and the dust of the earth. To the stars of heaven, where? For it is written, "Look toward heaven and count the stars" (Genesis 15:5); and to the dust of the earth, where? For it is said, "Your descendents shall be as the dust of the earth" (Genesis 28:14). (D'varim Rabbah 10:4)
2. God created man with four qualities of the angels and four qualities of the lower animals. Like the animals, he eats, drinks, reproduces, and dies. Like the angels, he stands erect, speaks, understands, and sees [from the sides as well as the front]. Rabbi Tifdai said, "The angels were created in the image of God and do not reproduce, while the earthly creatures reproduce but were not created in His image. Said God "I will create man in my image and likeness and in that way he will be like the angels. But he also will reproduce, like the animals". Rabbi Tifdai also said, "The Lord reasoned: "If I create him like the angels, he will live forever and not die; if I create him like the animals, he will die and not live forever. Therefore, I will create him as a combination of the upper and lower elements. If he sins he will die, and if he dies, he will live' [in the world to come]". (B'reishit Rabbah 14:3)
3. Antoninus said to Rabbi Judah the Patriarch, "The body and the soul can both free themselves from judgment. Thus, the body can plead "The soul has sinned - ever since the day it left me, look, I lie in the grave like a mute stone"; while the soul can plead "The body has sinned - ever since the day I departed from it, look, I fly about in the air like a bird." Rabbi Judah replied, "I will show you by a parable. A king of flesh and blood who owned a beautiful orchard, which yielded luscious first figs, appointed two watchmen - one lame and the other blind - over it. The lame watchman said to the blind one "I see some early figs in the orchard. Come and take me upon your shoulder, so that we can pick the figs and eat them.' The lame man got up on the blind man, and together they picked figs and ate them. After a while, the owner of the orchard came and inquired "Where are those early figs?' The blind man replied "Have I eyes to see with?' The lame man replied "Have

I legs to walk with?' What did the king do? He had the lame man mount upon the shoulders of the blind one and judged them together, as though they were one. So will the Holy One bring the soul, toss it inside the body, and judge the two together, as it is written "He shall call to the heavens from above, and to the earth, that He may judge His people" (Psalm 50:4). "He shall call to the heavens from above" - call for the soul; "and to the earth, that He may judge His people" - call for the body." (Talmud Sanhedrin 91a-b)

Sparks for Discussion

The passage from D'varim Rabbah explains that Moshe calls heaven and earth as witnesses because they work together in God's relationship with Israel. Some religious traditions emphasize the differences between heaven and earth, body and soul, the spiritual and the material, and you can find some of that in Jewish sources, but the commentaries here see them as inextricably intertwined. What does that say about human nature? What does this teach us about our physical needs and desires? What does this suggest about how we are to live our lives?

II. So Jeshurun grew fat and kicked - you grew fat and gross and coarse - he forsook the God who made him and spurned the Rock of his support. (Deuteronomy 32:15)

1. This is as people say - "A full stomach is the source of all troubles." (Talmud Brachot 32a)
2. Behold, you Jeshurun, the congregation of Torah adherents and men who are scholars and philosophers, have turned to material pleasures and grown gross, (incapable) of understanding subtle truths... Therefore, the multitude forsook God who made them. (Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno, 1475-1550, Italy)
3. Satiety leads to rebellion. Thus you find that the people of the generation of the flood rebelled against the Holy Blessed One only out of [abundance of] food and drink and out of ease of life. For what is said of them? "Their homes are secure, without fear" (Job 21:9). Similarly, we find that the people of the tower [of Babel] rebelled against the Holy Blessed One only out of ease of life, as it is said, "Everyone on earth had the same language" (Genesis 11:1) ... Similarly, you find that the people of the wilderness rebelled only out of (abundance of) food and drink, as it is said, "They sat down to eat and drink, and then rose to dance" (Exodus 32:6). (Sifre, Piska 318)
4. Nor is the decreasing of wealth an act of piety if such wealth happens to have been gained in a lawful way and its further acquisition does not prevent him from occupying himself with Torah and righteous deeds, especially for one who has family and dependents and whose desire is to spend his money for the sake of God... For you are, as it were, enjoying the Lord's hospitality, being invited to His table, and should thank Him for His bounty, both inwardly and outwardly. (Kuzari (Rabbi Yehuda Halevi), 1075-1141, Spain)
5. Judaism's concept of gratitude is rooted in the belief that we should take nothing for granted - not life, nor clothing, nor food. Those who do take these things for granted go through life with a sense of expectation, entitlement, and disappointment. Indeed, when their routine is interrupted - they don't feel well, their clothes are dirty, or food is not prepared to their liking - they experience anger and frustration. In contrast, the rabbis teach: "For every breath that a person takes he should praise his Creator" (Genesis Rabbah 14:9). (Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, A Code of Jewish Ethics: Vol I, You Shall Be Holy, pp. 492-493)

Sparks for Discussion

Our verse implies that prosperity and success lead to arrogance and ingratitude. Do you agree? Is it inevitable? Are those who are less well-off more grateful for what they have? How can a person enjoy prosperity without becoming "fat, gross, and coarse"?