



ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

“The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

53 Ha'azinu — Like an Eagle

Text

ותשמע הארץ אמרי-פי.	א האזינו השמים ואדברה
תזל כטל אמרתי	ב יער ר כמטר לקחי
וכרביבים עלי-עשב.	כשעירם עלי-דשא
הבו ג דל לאל הינו.	ג כי שם יהוה אקרא
פי כל-דרכיו משפט	ד הצור תמים פעלו
צדיק וישר הוא.	אל אמונה ואין ענל
דור עקש ופתלתל.	ה שחת לו לא בניו מומם
עם נבל ולא חכם	ו הליהוה תגמלו-זאת
הוא עשך ויכ' ננך.	הלוא-הוא אביך קנך
בינו שנות דר-נד' ר	ז זכר ימות עולם
זקניך וי' אמרו לך.	שאל אביך ויגדך
בהפרידו בני אדם	ח בהנחל עליון גוים
למספר בני ישראל.	יצב גבלת עמים
יעקב חבל נחלתו.	ט כי חלק יהוה עמו
ובת' הו ילל ישמן	י ימצאהו בארץ מדבר
יצרנהו כאישון עינו.	יס בבנהו יבוננהו
על-גוזליו ירחף יפר' ש כנפיו	יא כנשר יעיר קנו
	יקחהו ישאהו על-אברתו.

Devarim 32

1 Give ear, O heavens, let me speak;	Let the earth hear the words I utter!
2 May my discourse come down as the rain, Like showers on young growth,	My speech distill as the dew, Like droplets on the grass.
3 For the name of the Lord I proclaim;	Give glory to our God!
4 The Rock! — Her deeds are perfect, A faithful God, never false,	Yes, all Her ways are just; True and upright is She.
5 Children unworthy of Her — Their baseness has played Her false.	That crooked, perverse generation —
6 Do you thus requite the Lord, Is not She the Parent who created you, endure!	O dull and witless people? Fashioned you and made you
7 Remember the days of old, Ask your parent, s/he will inform you,	Consider the years of ages past; Your elders, they will tell you:
8 When the Most High gave nations their homes She fixed the boundaries of peoples	And set the divisions of man, In relation to Israel's numbers.
9 For the Lord's portion is Her people,	Jacob Her own allotment.
10 She found him in a desert region, She engirded him, watched over him,	In an empty howling waste. Guarded him as the pupil of Her eye.
11 Like an eagle who rouses her nestlings, So did She spread Her wings and take him,	Gliding down to her young, Bear him along on Her pinions.



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Context

Moshe calls on heaven and earth to witness his speech. He replays much of the content of the previous parasha, Va-Yelekh in poetic form and language. His words flow like the moistness of Creation, bringing forth blessing to the divine, and also chastising his People for their unworthiness. Moshe enumerates gifts that God has bestowed upon the Israelites, the special attention, feeding and protecting - to no avail. The people neglect their Maker, and turn to idols. The divine responds with anger – brings misfortune. But the enemies, aroused to destroy Israel, will be shown whose force will prevail. Moshe enjoins the People to convey his message onward through generations so that the Torah and its practices will endure.

God summons Moshe to the place where he will die, on Mount Nevo. From there, he will only see the Land, for he did not sanctify the divine at the waters of Meriva.

Explorations



Ha'azinu is Moshe's closing song. In the penultimate parasha of the final book of the Torah, Moshe turns to poetry to express himself and works with rare and nuanced language and metaphor. Parallelism of the structure and symmetry of words convey Moshe's inspiration, the solidity and stability of his message.

The format of the text in a hand-scribed Torah scroll draws attention to the passage and immediately communicates its uniqueness. Each verse divides in half to form two columns. The photo at left displays one scribe's version. The physical spacing opens the verses, and leaves air, breath between

words. The even columns suggest a well-balanced rhythm and cadence of chanting. At the beginning, Moshe calls upon heaven and earth to bear witness. The Zohar teaches:

We learned that when Moses said, "*Give ear, O heavens, and let me speak,*" the worlds shook. A voice resounded saying, "Moshe, Moshe, why are you shaking the whole world? You are human; shall the world shake because of you?" He replied and said, "*I will call on the name of God.*" At that moment they became silent and listened to his words. (Zohar Ha'azinu 297)

Moshe invokes a monumental moment, a moment shaking with awe – his last address, at the cusp of life and death. According to the Zohar, the power of his stature touches all of existence as he calls in the divine Name. Moshe intends his words to endure with the Creation. [Rashi](#) (based on the Sifrei 32:1) comments,

GIVE EAR O HEAVENS - I am warning Israel, and you shall be witnesses in this matter, for I have already told Israel that you will be witnesses. And so is [the clause] “And let the earth hear” [to be similarly understood]. Now why did [Moshe] call upon heaven and earth to be witnesses? Moshe said: “I am flesh and blood. Tomorrow I will die. If Israel says, ‘We never accepted the covenant,’ who will come and refute them?” Therefore, he



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called upon heaven and earth as witnesses for Israel that endure forever. Furthermore, if they [Israel] act meritoriously, the witnesses will come and reward them: “The vine will give its fruit, the earth will yield its produce, and the heavens will give their dew” (Zech. 8:12). And if [Israel] acts sinfully, the [punishing] hand of the witnesses will be upon them first: “She will close off heaven that there will be no rain, and the earth will not yield its produce” (Devarim 11:17), and then [the verse continues]: “and you will perish quickly”- by the nations.

Rashi explains two meanings for Moshe's opening lines.

- Creation – heaven and earth - bears eternal witness to the covenant of the Jewish People with the Creator, and will testify their affirmation of the commitment we have undertaken.
- The heavens and the earth are the means by which the covenant is accomplished, administering reward or punish according to how well we uphold our commitments. When our behavior honors the Torah and its teachings, the rain and earth will yield our sustenance; when we falter, we will have difficulty growing our nourishment and sustaining our lives.

Moshe intends for his speech to fertilize the People's connection with the divine and with the Land they will soon enter. Like rain and dew, perhaps referring to the Written and Oral Torah, these words are to irrigate souls, lift and inspire spirits. Moshe positions us between heaven and earth, channels for divine abundance. Moshe likens people to the herbs and grasses of the field, delicate young shoots. The divine teachings are meant to enable our healthy growth, stretching forth to heaven, and offering praise to our Maker, bringing glory to Her with our lives.

Moshe focuses on the special connection of the divine Creator with the People of Israel. He chooses evocative images to describe the relationship. Among the elements of Creation, the divine is Rock – pure, and enduring, solid as the fundament of the world.

On pasuk 4, *The Rock! — Her deeds are perfect, Yes, all Her ways are just,*

Midrash Tanchuma comments extensively about negotiating our experience of divine presence and absence. We do not always find the divine present in our lives and solid as a rock, or perhaps we find the Rock silent and unyielding. Living in the covenant commits us to seek Her actively, to turn and return to her.

The prophet Yeshayahu says, “Seek God when She is present” (Isaiah 55:6), but King David says, “Seek God and Her might; seek Her face constantly” (1 Chronicles 16:11). Why constantly? To teach you that the Holy, Blessed God:
is sometimes visible (see Shmot 33:11), sometimes invisible (see Shmot 33:14);
sometimes hears (Devarim 4:15), sometimes doesn't want to hear (Devarim 1:45);
sometimes answers (see 1 Shmuel 7:9), sometimes doesn't answer (1 Samuel 16:1);
is sometimes sought after, sometimes not;
is sometimes available, sometimes unavailable; is sometimes close, sometimes not close.



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Sometimes God as is close, as is written, “God is close to all who call Her...” (Psalms 145:18). Sometimes She is not close, as in (Proverbs 15:29), “Far from the wicked is God.” One verse (Numbers 6:26) says, “God will show you favor,” while another verse says, “She does not show favoritism” (Deuteronomy 10:17). If one returns to God, God will show her/him favor. This is why Yeshayahu says (Isaiah 55:6), “Seek God when She is present, call Her when She is close.”

God tells the Jewish people, “Know! I judge the world four times a year. On Pesach concerning grain, on Shavuot concerning fruit and on Sukkot concerning water. These are financial matters, whether to make someone wealthy or poor, whether to provide more or less. But on Rosh HaShanah I judge capital cases: whether to execute or to give life, and whether countries will have to go to war or enjoy peace.

“If you make wholehearted tshuva, I will accept you and judge you favorably, because the gates of Heaven are open, and I hear your prayers. I am watching from the windows, and peeking through the cracks, before I seal the verdict on Yom Kippur.”

This is why it’s a good idea to “Seek God when She is present” during the Ten Days of Tshuvah! God Herself says (Ezekiel 43:8), “There’s a wall between Me and them,” so “call Her when She’s close!” Let go of your naughty ways, your foolish thinking, so you can return to God and She can show you compassion (cf. Isaiah 55:6–7).

(Midrash Tanchuma, Ha'azinu 4)

The dynamic of seeking, approaching, engaging, and returning is an inspiring choreography for the covenant. The midrash is aware that we cannot stay fully in the divine presence indefinitely, without changing. We move toward and withdraw, build and weaken our connection with the divine. Our personal and national religious life is a dynamic unfolding process. We are to work toward spiritual awareness in the everyday, even when She is not apparent. On festivals, we approach as a People – facing our divine partner and accounting for ourselves and our actions. Four times a year we are reminded that there are consequences to our choices and actions. Moshe emphasizes that we do not live alone on earth – we are implicated in a demanding and potentially rewarding relationship.

By contrast with the divine partner to the covenant, Moshe's poem points to faults and unworthiness of the human partner. The previous generation strayed. Moshe's goal is to keep us on track. We are accountable to our divine parent who is figured as an eagle,

Like an eagle who rouses her nestlings,
Gliding down to her young,
So did She spread Her wings and take him,
Bear him along on Her pinions. (Devarim 53:11)

The initial verses of the revelation at Mount Sinai contain a similar account of the liberation from Egypt:

‘You have seen what I did to the Egyptians,
how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought
you to Me.’ (Shmot 19:4)





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The caring demeanor of a powerful celestial raptor conveys the tremendous vulnerability of Israel and, with careful nurture and persevering effort, the potential to grow and soar.

Questions for Discussion

- In our day, most written communication is either electronic or printed mechanically, with a mechanized appearance. Find an opportunity to get close to the Torah and examine the writing – perhaps by having an aliya- making blessings, or chanting the reading on a weekday, or on Shabbat. How do you perceive and relate to the writing – hand-scribed on vellum, sheets stitched together in one continuous scroll?
- Evaluate to what extent and how the covenantal process discussed here might help steer away from apathy and cynicism, and guide toward purpose and responsibility.
- Discuss your views about the human as channel between heaven and earth – in what ways do you or do you not identify with this portrayal?
- How does the eagle resonate with you as a divine image?
- In this session, I use exclusively feminine grammatical forms to refer to the divine. How does the language affect you and your understanding - of Moshe's song? Of the imagery Moshe uses?
- There are other poems in the Torah:
 - Yakov's deathbed blessings to his children: Ber. 49:3-27
 - The Song at the Sea: Shmot 15:1-21
 - An ironic record of the destruction of Heshbon: Bamidbar 21:27-30
 - Bilaam's speeches: Bamidbar 23:7-10 and 18-24, and 24:3-9
 - Moshe's final blessings to the tribes: Devarim 33

Read the passages, and consider their contexts. What similarities and/or differences do you perceive among the poems?

Study Links

There is a growing number of women Torah scribes in the world. The following links indicate the significance and breadth of their work:

- Israeli [“Torah scribe wields her quill against segregation of women”](#)
- [“Soferet: Jewish Female Scribes Receive The Torah”](#)
- [“What does Jewish law say about women becoming a Torah scribe?”](#)
- Shoshana Guggenheim's [“Women of the Book”](#) project is creating an extraordinary visual midrashic Torah scroll.
- [“Quill and scroll: Female Torah scribe at work in groundbreaking CJM exhibit”](#)

With respect to Moshe's views about divine involvement in human life and the mutual and covenantal relationship, Abraham Joshua Heschel contributed a theology that explores God's concern for humanity. See particularly *Man Is Not Alone* and *God in Search of Man*. Here is an [overview of Heschel's compelling theology](#) by Reuven Kimmelman.



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David Hartman writes a powerful explication of the Jewish covenant in his “master work”, *A Living Covenant: The Innovative Spirit in Traditional Judaism*. See [Avi Sagi's tribute to the book](#).



The eagle is an important symbol in many cultures.

The Aetos Dios was a giant, golden eagle which served as Zeus' personal messenger and animal companion. According to some, the eagle was once a mortal king named Periphas, whose virtuous rule was so celebrated that he was came to be honoured like a god. . . . [more](#)

In traditional native North American societies, the eagle is revered as the representative of divine values, and considered to have a special connection to the creator. Visit this [site about the eagle](#). Read this tribute to [Grandmother Mountain Eagle Woman](#) - pictured on the right.



Watch this video of [an eagle flying free in Israeli skies](#) as the radio announces the release of the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit after 1941 days of captivity in the hands of Hamas.

Read this article, “[Rare Imperial Eagle gets flying lessons in Israel](#)” - After patching up the injured bird, wildlife experts are giving her a refresher course in using her wings, by [Zafir Rinat](#) in *Haaretz*, Mar. 4, 2013.

Summary of Issues

Calling heaven and earth as witnesses, Moshe utters closing words in a poetic finale, charging the People of Israel to uphold our covenant with the divine. Figured as an eagle and nestlings, the divine-human partnership cycles through a process of drawing near and receding. We are to seek Her when She is hidden, and thereby find strength to honor our human responsibilities.

Methods & Observations

While Moshe is credited with transmitting the entire Written Torah, the last book, Devarim is uniquely spoken in his voice. Whatever views one holds about the authorship of the text and the persona of Moshe himself, Devarim has a very strong rhetorical dimension. In this parasha, Moshe's poem strategically appeals to his People to achieve reconciliation with the Creator, with heaven and earth. Haazinu is a prototype for the prophets and poetic liturgists to come.

Contact

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