

Shabbat Shuvah

Shabbat Shalom. I remember Rabbi Max Ticktin frequently reminding us that in this ending of Deuteronomy, the several parashiyot were speeches by Moses at the end of his life, speeches directed to the Children of Israel.

I chose this parshah because of the Song of Moses. Then I realized there is no particular melody associated with it. And then I discovered that the parshah on Shabbat before Yom Kippur, Shabbat Shuvah, is the opportunity for the rabbi, traditionally, to give the year's most important sermon. Fabragen does not emphasize the role of the rabbi. Still, I am belatedly aware of today's responsibility. The parshah just before Yom Kippur is associated with repentance or Teshuva because of its brief haftorah, from the prophets Micah and Hosea, with their sayings in liturgy. So, the haftorah is like the Yom Kippur machzor in miniature. But this parshah, itself, with the Song of Moses – how is it related to individual Teshuva and Yom Kippur?

In response to the parshah Ha-Azinu, we are trying to prepare for Yizkor, and Teshuva, by considering the Song of Moses. I posted some questions for discussion, on chat. I looked at what historians and scholars said about the Song of Moses, and also how rabbis have interpreted it, and the concept of Teshuva. I also consulted two old biographies of Moses: by Buber and by Freud, and Max's copy of a book by Brettler, which Max reviewed: *How to Read the Bible*.

This parshah offers guidance on how we should conduct ourselves, individually or as a religious community or society, to be mindful of our past, and not pursue false gods, or idols. And the Song's imagery of water (v. 2) corresponds to Micah and Tashlich: the washing away of sins.

This Monday, we have a Yizkor service. Many of us have lost our fathers, some of us our mothers, too. Or we lost someone else, perhaps our partner, for whom we grieve this past year, or whom we remember at this time. Can this parshah prompt us to remember family or exemplars who have passed away, or to remember codes of conduct? In this parshah, v. 7, Moses urges, "Ask thy father, and he will declare unto thee, Thine elders, and they will tell thee."

In this parshah, Moses is reciting his song. What's a "song," in the Torah? Scholars speculate about the role of songs in the Tanach. A song invites theatricality, participation, learning and remembrance. Some of us *respond* to poetry. In Dale Lupu's Fabragen drash for Rosh Hashana last week, she *sang* a poem for the end of summer, by Mary Oliver, defining "what a prayer is." (David Blumenthal echoed this in his comments about the poet today.) And a number of Fabrangeners sang a version of "G-d is Watching Us." Many commentators note that Moses's career leading the people in the desert begins with Miriam's song, the Song of the Sea, and ends with this Song of Moses. The previous parshah says that Moses wrote this song, put the words by the Ark with the Commandments, and taught the Song to the people. Joshua also leads the song.

This Song is largely cautionary, somewhat threatening. Perhaps it is dictated by Hashem. But I imagine Moses feels that he is about to die, is resentful and fearful that Hashem has punished him. So in his own way, Moses transfers that feeling of dread or fear to his listeners.

Brettler, in *How to Read the Bible*, reports an interesting interpretation which says the Song is quite similar to Assyrian covenant contracts between a ruler and his subjects. Judah was once ruled by Assyria, possibly at the time this text was created. In these kinds of covenants, the ruler would appeal to gods to punish a vassal after listing ways in which the vassal was unfaithful to the ruler. Some scholars have compared the Song to a covenant lawsuit, apparently Hashem suing the People Israel; the jury or witnesses could be in heaven, and Moses helps testify or announces or explains the verdict. The legalistic motif fits with Yom Kippur and Hashem's judgment.

Freud says that a hero is someone who overtakes or conquers his father. And just as Moses as a youngster rebelled against his father, Buber points out that Moses as a nabi, a prophet, confronts Pharaoh. And here, at the end of Deuteronomy, aged Moses is again opposing idol-worship and he is paving the way for Joshua.

When we remember or think of our parents, or people we have lost, do we mythologize them? Do we search for their beginnings, make family trees and genealogy? Do we resent their mistakes, like resenting Moses not saying the blessing for the water from the rock? And do we regret our own failings, our mistreatment of them, like the Children of Israel complaining, complaining about their food in the desert?

The imagery of the eagle in this parshah (v. 11) may represent either or both mother and father, sheltering the eaglets, but also gently encouraging the nestlings to fledge from the nest, to fly.

Finally, why might we study Moses's Song, and his impending death, now? Moses's Song is not only the words of Moses, but the words of Hashem. Repentance for Jews at the time of Yom Kippur, and the accompanying liturgy, mixes the personal and the collective. This pandemic, the Torah portion, and maybe Yom Kippur as well, challenge us to choose between "I" and "we." We generally pray saying "we," and refer to the Jewish community. Hashem is "*our father, our king,*" not Moses's father or king. (Buber wrote a famous theological book, "I and Thou;" especially for us on this holiday; it might be useful if he had written a sequel book, called "I and We"). There is no uniform Jewish society now; there are *many* Jewish communities, and many are well integrated into non-Jewish societies, which may themselves need repentance and reform. The broader national or international sense of sin and crisis is much in the media and on our minds. The appropriateness of this parshah may be how it clearly links the personal, very human culpability and anguish of the individual leader with words about collective responsibility and our worries about health and leadership.

This parshah tries, with verbal encouragement and persuasion, to make repentance possible.

I started this drash wanting to explain and ask teacher's questions, but I keep wanting to be the student too, asking student's questions. On chat are posted possible questions for discussion. I look forward to any of your teachings, explanations, or answers. Shabbat Shalom. [L'Shana Tova]

Possible Questions for Discussion, After Drash:

- *Do you understand someone better, now, for Yizkor; if so, how did you arrive at this understanding? Do you recall an anecdote or custom that your parents told you about their Yom Kippur experience?*
- *Is there some song or poem that influenced you and that comes to mind for Yom Kippur?*
- *Does individual repentance feel more meaningful or accessible than collective repentance? What are various meanings of "return" or Teshuva, for you? Can it imply nostalgia?*
- *If Hashem was trying to teach us, collectively, something this past year, what was that message?*