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The Power of Song, and the Role of Rhetoric

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This week's Torah portion, Ha'azinu, contains some striking rhetoric and one of the most memorable events in the whole Torah, as Deuteronomy surges towards its conclusion. The parsha contains the "Song of Moses" – his final address to the Israelites – and it comes to a close with God's pronouncement that Moses, about to die, will not be allowed to enter the land of Israel.

There is a great deal to dig into in this week's parsha, and commentators have honed in on numerous pieces of the portion, but I want to hone in on the rhetoric on display. The famous "Song of Moses" – specially designated in the Gemara as needing to be marked off in the text in special two-column format – contains some stirring words from the almighty. It begins with Moses speaking directly to the people, offering rather typical words about the perfection of God and the imperfection of humankind. But then, the real fireworks begin. As Moses' words

begin to intensify, he makes way for an extended diatribe from God, and God leaves nothing to the imagination:

21 They have provoked my jealousy with a non-God, provoked my anger with their vanities. Thus, I will provoke their jealousy with a non-people, provoke their anger with a foolish nation... 23 I will link evils upon them. I will use up my arrows on them. 24 They will sprout hair from famine, attacked by demons, excised by Meriri. I will incite the teeth of livestock upon them, with the venom of creatures that slither in the dust. 25 From outside, the sword will bereave, and terror from within; young men and maidens, suckling babes with venerable elders. 26 I said that I would make an end of them, eradicate their remembrance from mankind... 35 Vengeance is poised with me, and it will pay at the time their foot stumbles. For the appointed day of their reckoning is near, and what is destined for them hastens... 37 Where is their deity, the rock in which they trusted... 39 See now that it is I! I am the one, and there is no god like me! I cause death and grant life. I strike, but I heal, and no one can rescue from my Hand... 41 When I sharpen the blade of My sword, and My hand grasps judgment, I will bring vengeance upon My adversaries and repay those who hate Me. 42 I will intoxicate My arrows with blood, and My sword will consume flesh, from the blood of the slain and the captives, from the first breach of the enemy. (Deuteronomy 32: 21-42)

These are the words of the all-knowing, transcendent, supernatural God, to whom we are supposed to be ever-devoted?! This is one of the aspects of the Torah that has always been most troubling to me, and I found this taking on particular resonance today. I'm profoundly troubled by hateful, controlling rhetoric among people of flesh and bones, and I am horrified by those who create space for such rhetoric throughout our country – perhaps most centrally our current President. How could it be, and why would it be, that our tradition would include, imagine, and venerate a God who is so contemptuous? This parsha seems to show that even the most questionable rhetoric that our President uses is firmly in 'image of God.' What inspiration are we to take from this? What can we presume to be the motivation for this kind of image being painted of our ruler, whether we take it to have been written by Moses, God, or by a group of individuals at some later date? Further, it certainly seems not to be a coincidence that we read this portion on the Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the time of judgment. As we

seek to repent, and as we believe God is writing down the judgments that have been decided for us – on Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed – I find it rather fascinating that we see God’s judgment on display in this way.

But the aspect of this week’s parsha that is most striking to me is the very end. After this diatribe from God, featuring this fiery rhetoric that we take to be incredibly deplorable today, God offers a final punishment for Moses. Moses, who has led the Israelites so well for so many years, will not be allowed to enter the land of Israel.

50 ...Die on the mountain upon which you are climbing and be gathered to your people, just as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his people. 51 Because you betrayed Me in the midst of the children of Israel at the waters of Merivath Kadesh, [in] the desert of Zin, [and] because you did not sanctify Me in the midst of the children of Israel. 52 For from afar, you will see the land, but you will not come there, to the land I am giving the children of Israel. (Deuteronomy 32: 50-52)

Scholars interpret this as being God’s punishment for Moses striking the rock in Parshat Chukat. After showing no leadership worth praising, God rather vindictively punishes Moses for one (yes, rather big, but still...) mistake he made long ago. How are we to interpret the God found in this parsha? In an age where the words our leader offers are so problematic to me, and to so many others (this is believed on many sides, many sides...), what does this aspect of our tradition teach us?

As someone who is fortunate to sing for a living, I also couldn’t help but comment on the significance of these words – Moses’ final speech to the Israelites, and these words from God – all coming in the context of a “song.” I certainly find that words’ meaning is elevated when placed in the context of song, and Jewish tradition does, too. As I prepare myself for the High Holidays, I always reflect on the power of the “Mi-Sinai” melodies. Tradition holds that God handed down these melodies, which make up the bulk of the High Holiday nusach in the Ashkenazi tradition, to Moses at Mount Sinai. As this music has been passed down from generation to generation, its meaning has only become more and more deeply

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enhanced. Thus is the power of song – enhancing the meaning of text, and tying us to our community, and this certainly holds true in this week’s parsha. While the “Song of Moses” may include some somewhat troubling content, it is no coincidence that these words are elevated in song.

Wishing everyone a wonderful Rosh Hashanah, and a sweet new year!

Continue the *conversation*. Send Aryeh your thoughts:

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