

## INTRODUCTION

I need not tell you that the cycle of time slowly grinds on, as is emphasized in our High Holiday liturgy. We all want to know where the summer has gone as we feel the crispness of early fall in the air. Jewish time mandates the holidays of R"H and Y"K in this season which separates us quickly from our summer reveries. And the cycle of the reading of the Torah is winding down to Sukkoth and Simchat Torah, i.e., the end of the cycle and a new beginning.

Our Parashah today is HAAZINU, an epic poem supposedly spoken by Moses as he contemplates his death. The tone is magisterial and lofty as befits a grand and aged leader as he shuffles off the stage of life, but not a feel-good composition.

I'd like to go over the poem with you in detail. The imagery is very artful, but ultimately the tone is bitter. Once we review highlights of the text, I will offer an explanation for the bitterness. Please keep your Eitz Hayim Chumashim and open to page 1185.

## REVIEW OF HAAZINU POEM

v.1&2: This is a grand invocation, calling on heaven and earth to listen and witness. He describes the "broadcast" of the speech as dropping like rain or dew, i.e. not to a select few or a restricted place but to everyone and everywhere. This is very much like the invocation to the gods we see in classical Greek poetry.

v, 4: Acknowledgement of God who is described as a ROCK and PERFECT. Rock: immovable, and a refuge. Perfect: as befits God.

v. 6: This is the argument here. God is perfect and never-changing, but the children of Israel are perfidious.

v. 9-11: Description of the original relationship between God and Israel. The image of the hovering eagle is very powerful.

v. 13: It was good for Israel. See the source for the band/group Honey from the Rock.

v. 15: Jeshurun (Israel) gets fat and lazy and careless. The sacred relationship suffers.

v. 20: God says, I will hide my face from them. Recall Bohnen talk on the Birkat Cohanim.

v. 32-33: Vivid but bitter imagery.

v. 42: Again, a very vivid description of God seeking revenge.

v 52: Moshe will not enter the Promised Land.( Not a part of the poem.)

As a first exercise, compare this poem to the Song of the Sea in Shemot (Exodus Chapter 15).

1. SOS is triumphant; Haz is despairing
2. in SOS, God is described as a warrior who defeats his enemies.
3. in Haz, God revenges his enemies.
4. ?? compare and contrast

But why the bitterness? why the certainty of Israel's perfidy? Everett Fox, in his Chumash translation called the Five Books of Moses, asserts that while the text claims that Moses says these words just before he dies, he and many other scholars feel that Deuteronomy was written in the middle of the reign of King Josiah (640-608 BCE). Here are two quotes from Fox:

"It is in fact the monarchic setting that is commonly held to be the historical background to the compilation of Deuteronomy. While Moshe's last days and the people's being poised on the steppes opposite Jericho would certainly be a dramatic enough moment for our book's speeches to occur, its language, style, and many of its concerns point to a later time in the history of Israelis as a likely venue for at least good part of its emotional appeal."

"...the text of Deuteronomy addresses its audience with such emotional immediacy that it may safely be presumed that a crisis of major proportions loomed, and the opportunity presented itself for a large scale revival-or redefinition-of Israel's self-understanding. "

The Josiah reform probably preserved the entire enterprise of the Jewish religion. "Before him, there had never been a king like him who returned to Hashem with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his resources, in accordance with the entire Torah of Moses and after him no one arose like him." (Kings II 23: 25). How appropriate that in this season of T'shuva, we recall King Josiah who worked such an important reform.

So to summarize, King Josiah having read the "found book" we now know as Deuteronomy undergoes a great religious conversion. The sense of betrayal we just read in HAAZINU may be a function of Josiah's time, a polemic against the wayward people of that time, not a polemic against the people who are left after 4 years of wandering in the desert.