

1. Ha'azinu is one of the great epic poems of the Bible. To summarize, its style is lofty and inspiring but its content is problematic.
2. Written in biblical poetry style, with parallel verses each stating the same thing but rhyming in meaning: "Give ear, o heavens, let me speak; Let the earth hear the words I utter."
3. Moses calls on heaven and earth, enduring witnesses to these events. He likens his words to rain or dew, another very natural image linking the poem to the real and natural world.
4. God is described as Tsur- the Rock. We know this word from Maoz Tsur which really means Fortress Rock. If you have been to the Negev, you have seen great rocky mountains which would be very secure against an invader.
5. The major theme of Haazinu is how God was solid and entered a covenantal relationship with Israel, but then Israel betrayed the trust. It sure doesn't sound like what Moshe would be saying before his death, but rather what someone would say after the loss of the kingdom of Israel. God is also described as an eagle who cares for and protects his/her eaglets.
6. The real problem here is that God's anger is very strong. There is little hint here of forgiveness, mercy or teshuvah; concepts which probably were not talked about at the time of the writing of this piece.
7. A second theme in evidence here is vengeance. The images of "arrows drunk with blood" and a "sword devouring flesh" offend modern sensibilities.
8. So our Jewish civilization has evolved as we heard just 2 days ago. We went from communal sin applied to a communal goat who was sent into the wilderness to perish bearing away our sins, to a sense of individual responsibility for sin, but also the possibility of Teshuvah.
9. It took the Prophets to buffer some of the harshness of the Torah. Consider the Haftarah we read on the second day of R"H from Jeremiah 31. "From afar Hashem appears to me saying, I have loved you with an eternal love, therefore I have extended kindness to you." "Is Ephraim my most precious son or a delightful child that whenever I speak to him I remember him more and more. Therefore, my guts/inner self yearn for him. I will surely take pity on him."
10. See verse 20: "He said, I will hide my face from them." The concept of hiding the face (Hester Panim) describes a modern problem which brings up images of our own cruel century. This itself is material for a weekend seminar.
11. So we need the prophetic sensibility to soften the Biblical harshness. We need to bring Teshuvah, mercy and forgiveness to impact on the harsh decree. In other words, strict justice, human or divine, must be tempered by Rachmones.