

September 19, 2004

Roslyn G. Weiner

r.g.weiner@comcast.net

(please feel invited and encouraged to email me with any comments, reflections, questions)

Today is Shabbat Shuvah the Sabbath before Yom Kippur which takes its name from the haftorah which begins with Hosea's call for our return and repentance. Thematically, this haftorah is quite compatible with the RH liturgy and motifs of this penitential period which invites us to straighten things out between ourselves and each other and between ourselves and God.

Isaiah wrote: **Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near.** Is the Judge about whom we heard a great deal the past few days near and accessible—our light, Lord of Compassion—or is the one the mahzor describes as “Mysterious Presence” busy, far away, working out plans for our lives in the coming year?

What is the context in which we read this week's portion? We are as vulnerable as Moses, he is facing his death and we have just spent two days reciting liturgy which though it emphasizes God's creative energy, places us squarely in touch with our own mortality. The circumstances are similar to those in this sedra. God has tried hard to be generous with us; we have or have not lived up to God's expectations for us; God will judge us; the outcome of the judgment is not ours to determine.

God tries hard, like a devoted parent, to guide us. God provides moral and spiritual tools for us to use to improve ourselves. The anger and intensity communicated through the poem of Moses suggests that we have worn God out. Maybe it is Moses who is worn out. The poem reads like its author is spewing out all his or her frustration. Then without transition, there is a shift and we will be protected from our enemies. God has decided to watch over us again. It would seem that God has been transformed; we certainly haven't evidenced any particular transformation ourselves.

The portion begins with a familiar theme: Moses will speak and we are to listen, give ear; hear O Israel, how important it is to listen.

I imagine a court room with heaven and earth in the seats reserved for those who would witness the actions of the judge. Symbolically, heaven represents our souls and earth our bodies. We are to listen with our souls and our bodies. The case being set out is our baseness versus God's goodness. And we are invited to incline towards our own goodness, and towards that of God's. Our relationship with God is revealed in this sedrah as: Simultaneous giving and taking—a relationship that is larger than any one individual life.

In chapter 32 verse 15 our inadequacies and failures are revealed and in verse 19 we received our chastisements; then in verse 26 though we didn't repent, God reins in his anger and turns retributive attention towards our enemies. We are restored and delivered gratuitously.

Then we are instructed to turn to God not for what we might receive but in order to accept the charge of Devarim, the words of the Torah.

In the context of the days of awe, I find verses 45-47 most compelling. Read from JPS translation. **Take to heart all the words with which I have warned you this day. Enjoin them upon your children that they may observe faithfully all the terms of this Teaching. For this is not a trifling thing for you; it is your very life; through it you shall long endure on the land that you are to possess upon crossing the Jordan.** Key words for me, *heart, faithfully, your very life, endure*

In JPS edition of the Chumash, the Midrash is quoted that any perception of emptiness in Torah is due to our own failure to perceive and understand. Jeffrey Tigay says to study it thoroughly; but I think it is more than a head or cognitive action; it has to do with engagement on all possible levels, physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual. Rashi says, "Indeed it is necessary for a [human being] that eyes, heart, and ears should all be attentively directed to the words of the Torah...because the words of Torah are like ...mountains suspended on a hair." Every word has something in it that benefits us. Every detail deepens our knowing and therefore enriches the quality of our lives.

Also in the JPS commentary is the observation following Hammurabi that we are to react to Torah as an object of wonder, this I would reframe as radical amazement following the understanding of the Hebrew *yirah* as awe and not fear.

What is life, as represented in this portion? True life is "devekut", understood in hasidus as clinging to God. Tigay describes it as being physically close, expressing emotional attachment and loyalty. At this season we are invited—no urged—to return, *tshuvah*, to God. One way is through study of Torah, actually living a life which embodies the teachings. Another path, not exclusive of the first, is though a focus on the sacred/human relationship, being aware of God and permitting oneself to be seen by God. Prayer, study, mitzvot all nourish that relationship and that mutual seeing and being seen. Through my reading and training in the practice of spiritual direction I have learned how to take time to contemplatively consider my life experiences through the lens of God's presence in them. And there is a third path, again not exclusive of the others, that is captured in an expression from the tradition of Buddhism "Namaste" which means the divine in me notices, acknowledges the divine in you. In our tradition that is the same as seeking to appreciate the deeper parts, the soul parts, the heaven-given parts of other persons in our lives and in our communities through being in touch with the deeper parts of ourselves. **Mine is the faith that I will surely see the Lord's goodness in the land of the living.** These lines from Psalm 27 reflect our hope that if we look carefully, we can see the divine spark that inhabits every living being. I believe the practice of Namaste underscores the obligation of this season to ask forgiveness of the persons we have wronged before we seek forgiveness of God. And this practice is also embedded in every act of g'imulut Hasidim that is encouraged in us through the words of Torah.

All three of these paths lead to "devekut", clinging together, a literal translation, sticking together. Human beings to God, and as evidenced in the poem of this parasha, God to human beings. Our portion speaks of attachment in parental terms, nurturance, protection, chastisement, punishment. We cling to God by emulating God's attributes—graciousness, compassion, patience, kindness, faithfulness, forgiveness.

How we treat each other draws us closer or causes us to feel farther away from God. Our tradition recognizes that as human beings, we are likely to have limitations, be weakened or even overwhelmed by our failures, and be contrite about our misdeeds. As God shifts with us, as expressed in this parasha, we can feel encouraged to shift within ourselves, to recognize how we have wronged others, to endeavor to make amends.

Devotion is reciprocal. We care for God through caring for each other and through study, prayer and good deeds. God cares for us by renewing creation, by renewing us. It is not an *if you, then I* but an *I and you*...an understanding eloquently articulated by Martin Buber. He writes: "I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You. All actual life is encounter." I see the mutual devotion between us and God as having a two part outcome—the relationship is good for us and through it we can become more good. However, this is a relationship impossible without faith because the truth of its existence is beyond rational knowing

Take to heart...this is your very life. The Torah gives life, in that it gives to the shell which is our body the nourishing substance it requires for more than robotic existence, like God breathing life-giving spirit into us.

Until the real thing comes along—Berg

Outside, the sky is a pale blue, the holy color of a fresco. I look up into it...remembering a whimsical belief I'd once enjoyed. I imagined I'd had a choice about whether or not to be born and that I was a perfectly happy angel in heaven and then my turn for The Conversation came up and God and I sat with crossed legs in [God's] office full of clouds and [God] said, "so? You want to be born and I said, I don't know what's involved?"

Well, he said, you'd go to Earth. Earth, I said.

Yes, he said, Earth. It's quite beautiful there. And of course you'd be living with human beings.

What's human beings, I asked and [God] sighed deeply, but [God] smiled, sighing, and there was so much tenderness there you knew [God's] love far outweighed [God's] regret.

Human beings, [God] said, they are the ones with the most important job. They are supposed to make what they want out of what they are given.

Do they do it, I asked and God said, sometimes not. But sometimes so.

Ha'azinu calls us to pay attention to the fact that we have been given an ethical path by a divine force who imbues us with sacred spirit at the moment of our birth and challenges, goads, perhaps even pleads with us to engage meaningfully with each other and all of nature on that path as long as we possess that spirit. Understanding that we are less than perfect, the divine words also provide opportunity and even technique for identifying when we miss our intended mark (the Hebrew is *chet*) and making significant reparation. I pray that in the New Year each of us and all of us as a community will want, each in our own way and in our own time, to use the sacred Words to create meaning within our own lives, and within this minyan and Temple and wider community, in ways that give nurturance to ourselves, each other and our relationship with God. So may it be so.
