

Parshat Ha'azinu: Moshe Between Heaven and Earth Rabbi Dr. Devorah Schoenfeld

Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track Class of 2019

Give ear, heavens, and I will speak! Listen, earth, to the words of my mouth!

הָאֲזִינוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֲדַבְרָה וְתִשְׁמַע הָאָרֶץ אִמְרֵי־פִי:

This short parasha of Ha'azinu is almost entirely the song of Moshe before his death. He begins this song by asking heaven and earth to listen. Devarim Rabbah 10:4 explains why in a parable which compares Moshe to someone who served in two feuding places:

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman said, what is this like? A general who served in two provinces, one Roman and one a colony. When he was about to make a celebration, he said to himself, "If I invite one the other will be angry." What did he do? He invited both. Thus Moshe was from the earth and raised to heaven, as it is written, "And he was there with God forty days." (Exodus 34:28) He said, "If I invite heaven, earth will be angry, and if I invite earth, heaven will be angry. So I will invite both heaven and earth, as it is written, 'Give ear, heavens.'" (Deuteronomy 32:1)

אמר רבי שמואל בר נחמן למה הדבר דומה, לאסטרוטיגין ששמש בשני מדינות פרו וקלאונה, עשה יום טוב, אמר אם קורא אני לאלו, אלו כועסים, ואם אני קורא לאלו, אלו כועסים, מה עשה, קרא לאלו ולא לו. כך משה היה מן הארץ וגדל בשמים, מנין, שנאמר (שמות לד, כח): ויהי שם עם ה' ארבעים יום וגו', אמר אם קורא אני לשמים, הארץ רוגזת, ואם אני קורא לארץ, השמים רוגזין, אמר, הריני קורא לשניהם, לשמים ולארץ, שנאמר (דברים לב:א): האזינו השמים

This parable is startling on a number of levels. First, Moshe here is preparing for his own death. In what way is this a celebration? Second, what does it mean for heaven and earth to be angry with each other? Why would they both want the attention of Moshe?

A second parable in Devarim Rabbah 10:4 describes Moshe and his concerns rather differently:

Another interpretation: Why heaven and earth? Rabbi Hanina said: what is this like? It is like someone who left something with his friend for safekeeping. The man who left the article died and his son came and showed honor to the friend and his wife. They asked him, "Why are you honoring both?" He replied, "You have something of mine and it is not clear to me which of you has it, the husband or the wife. This way whoever has my possession will guard it well." Similarly, they asked Moshe why he was addressing heaven and earth. He said to them, "I am going to die and I do not know where my soul is going, to heaven or to earth, as it is said, 'Who knows if the soul of a person ascends?' (Ecclesiastes 3:21) Therefore I am addressing both, so that wherever my soul rests it will be well guarded. God said to him, "By your life no creature will rule over your soul, it will rest under the Divine Throne in heaven." As Avigayil said, "And may the soul of my lord be bound in the bounds of life with the Lord your God." (1 Samuel 25:29)

דבר אחר, למה לשמים ולארץ, אמר רבי חנינא למה הדבר דומה לאחד שהפקיד פקדון אצל אוהבו, מת אוהבו שהפקיד את הפקדון אצלו, עמד בנו של אותו שהפקיד הפקדון והיה מכבד לאותו שהפקיד הפקדון אצלו ומכבד לאשתו, אמרו לו למה אתה מכבד את שניהם, אמר להן פקדון יש לי אצלם ואינה ברורה לי אצל מי הוא הפקדון, אם אצלו אם אצל אשתו, כל היכן שפקדוני מנח שיהא שמור יפה. כך אמרו לו למשה למה אתה מצוה לשמים ולארץ, אמר להן, אני עתיד למות ואיני יודע להיכן נפשי הולכת, אם לשמים אם לארץ, מנין, שנאמר (קהלת ג, כא): מי יודע רוח בני האדם העולה היא למעלה וגו', לפיכך אני מצוה את שניהם, כל מקום שתהא נפשי מנחת שתהא יפה. אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא חייך אין בריה שליט על נפשך, והיכן היא מנחת תחת כסא הכבוד בשמים, שכן אביגיל אומרת (שמואל א כה, כט): והיתה נפש אדני צרוה בצרור החיים את ה' אלהיך

In this Midrash, Moshe is speaking as he is about to die and doesn't know if he is going to heaven or to earth. He shows honor to both of them in the hope that whichever receives his soul will care for it well. God consoles Moshe by

swearing that his soul will go nowhere but the Holy Throne. Here Moshe is neither happy nor celebrating, rather he is afraid, and worried about what will happen to him after his death. Heaven and earth are not rivals here but a married couple, responsible together for the care of human souls.

The song itself, in its complex and poetic language, describes the fraught, complicated relationship between God and Israel. It opens with the praise of God, and then to God's choosing of Israel. Despite Israel's relationship with God, it nevertheless sinned by committing idolatry. The song then describes how God nearly destroyed Israel in punishment, but chose not to, and instead made Israel victorious over its enemies. The song might refer to the past, with Israel's sins in worshipping the Golden Calf, or to the future and all the sins they commit later. Strikingly, Moshe does not call on Israel to repent in this song, or to choose well, although he does so on many other occasions. What saves the people from destruction here is not their repentance but God's own decision not to destroy them, because of God's own greatness which Moshe praises.

In our cycle of Torah readings, we read the story of the death and final prophecies of Moshe during Elul and Tishrei, as we prepare for and go through Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. The liturgy encourages us to identify with Moshe in facing the ending of our year. The Selichot liturgy, which is part of this process, retells the story of Moshe in perhaps his most dramatic moment of acting as ambassador to both earth and heaven. When God wants to punish people for the sin of the calf, Moshe begs God to forgive, not because the people have repented but because of God's own greatness. The Selichot liturgy places us in the role of Moshe as we speak the Thirteen Divine Attributes that invoke God's greatness as a reason for us to not be destroyed.

In the two parables about Moshe calling on heaven and earth we see two ways to approach Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. In the first, Moshe isn't afraid. He is celebrating. He knows that God will, in the end, treat us well. Endings are a natural consequence of beginnings and not to be feared. We sin, over and over, and God gives us opportunities to return, because God is great and our relationship with God endures. Heaven and earth here are rivals but Moshe stands confidently in both, speaking to both God and the people.

In the second parable, Moshe faces the end of his life with fear and confusion. The process of accounting for our actions over the past year can be terrifying. We are responsible to both heaven and earth. Have we lived up to those responsibilities? Heaven and earth are married in this parable because, like Moshe, we are responsible to both God and to humanity.

Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, and the weeks surrounding them, are times of great celebration and also of great fear. We enjoy festive meals in celebration of our enduring relationship with God and with the created world, and we also take stock of the ways in which we may not always have lived up to that relationship. Like Moshe, we stand between heaven and earth, responsible to both, at a time of endings and beginnings.



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