

Kol Rina  
*An Independent Minyan*  
Parashat Ha'azinu  
October 12, 2019 \*\*\* 13 Tishrei, 5780

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We **welcome all** to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals

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Ha'azinu in a Nutshell

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/3109/jewish/Haazinu-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3109/jewish/Haazinu-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

The greater part of the Torah reading of Haazinu (“Listen In”) consists of a 70-line “song” delivered by Moses to the people of Israel on the last day of his earthly life. Calling heaven and earth as witnesses, Moses exhorts the people, “Remember the days of old / Consider the years of many generations / Ask your father, and he will recount it to you / Your elders, and they will tell you” how G-d “found them in a desert land,” made them a people, chose them as His own, and bequeathed them a bountiful land. The song also warns against the pitfalls of plenty—“Yeshurun grew fat and kicked / You have grown fat, thick and rotund / He forsook G-d who made him / And spurned the Rock of his salvation”—and the terrible calamities that would result, which Moses describes as G-d “hiding His face.” Yet in the end, he promises, G-d will avenge the blood of His servants, and be reconciled with His people and land.

The Parshah concludes with G-d’s instruction to Moses to ascend the summit of Mount Nebo, from which he will behold the Promised Land before dying on the mountain. “For you shall see the land opposite you; but you shall not go there, into the land which I give to the children of Israel.”

Haftarah in a Nutshell: II Samuel 22:1-51.

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/566262/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/566262/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

This week's haftarah describes the song King David composed in his old age, echoing the weekly Torah reading, where Moses delivers his parting words to the Jewish nation in song form.

David's song expresses gratitude to G-d for saving him from all his enemies. He starts with the famous words, "The L-rd is my rock and my fortress." He goes on to describe the

pain and hardships he encountered and reiterates that he always turned to G-d in his moments of distress. He recounts G-d's reaction to those who tormented him: "The Lord thundered from heaven; and the Most High gave forth His voice. And He sent out arrows and He scattered them, lightning and He discomfited them. . . I have pursued my enemies and have destroyed them; never turning back until they were consumed." The King attributes his salvation to his uprightness in following G-d's ways: "The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands He recompensed me..."

The song ends with David's expression of thankfulness: "Therefore I will give thanks to You, O Lord, among the nations, and to Your name I will sing praises. He gives great salvation to His king, and He performs kindness to His anointed; to David and to his seed, forevermore."

### FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Let My Teaching Drop as Rain (Ha'azinu 5780)

<http://rabbisacks.org/haazinu-5780/>

In the glorious song with which Moses addresses the congregation, he invites the people to think of the Torah – their covenant with God – as if it were like the rain that waters the ground so that it brings forth its produce:

Let my teaching drop as rain,  
My words descend like dew,  
Like showers on new grass,  
Like abundant rain on tender plants. (Deut. 32:2)

God's word is like rain in a dry land. It brings life. It makes things grow. There is much we can do of our own accord: we can plough the earth and plant the seeds. But in the end our success depends on something beyond our control. If no rain falls, there will be no harvest, whatever preparations we make. So it is with Israel. It must never be tempted into the hubris of saying: "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me" (Deut. 8:17).

The Sages, however, sensed something more in the analogy. This is how Sifrei (a compendium of commentaries on Numbers and Deuteronomy dating back to the Mishnaic period) puts it:

*Let my teaching drop as rain: Just as the rain is one thing, yet it falls on trees, enabling each to produce tasty fruit according to the kind of tree it is – the vine in its way, the olive tree in its way, and the date palm in its way – so the Torah is one, yet its words yield Scripture, Mishnah, laws, and lore. Like showers on new grass: Just as showers fall upon plants and make them grow, some green, some red, some black, some white, so the words of Torah produce teachers, worthy individuals, Sages, the righteous, and the pious.[1]*

There is only one Torah, yet it has multiple effects. It gives rise to different kinds of teaching, different sorts of virtue. Torah is sometimes seen by its critics as overly prescriptive, as if it sought to make everyone the same. The Midrash argues otherwise. The Torah is compared to rain precisely to emphasise that its most important effect is to make each of us grow into what we could become. We are not all the same, nor does Torah seek uniformity. As a famous Mishnah puts it: "When a human being makes many coins from the same mint, they are all the same. God makes everyone in the same image – His image – yet none is the same as another" (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5).

This emphasis on difference is a recurring theme in Judaism. For example, when Moses asks God to appoint his successor, he uses an unusual phrase: "May the Lord, *God of the spirits of all humankind*, appoint a man over the community" (Num. 27:16). On this, Rashi comments:

*Why is this expression ("God of the spirits of all humankind") used? [Moses] said to Him: Lord of the universe, You know each person's character, and that no two people are alike. Therefore, appoint a leader for them who will bear with each person according to*

*his or her disposition.*

One of the fundamental requirements of a leader in Judaism is that he or she is able to respect the differences between human beings. This is a point emphasised by Maimonides in *Guide for the Perplexed: Man is, as you know, the highest form in creation, and he therefore includes the largest number of constituent elements. This is why the human race contains so great a variety of individuals that we cannot discover two persons exactly alike in any moral quality or in external appearance.... This great variety and the necessity of social life are essential elements in man's nature. But the well-being of society demands that there should be a leader able to regulate the actions of man. He must complete every shortcoming, remove every excess, and prescribe for the conduct of all, so that the natural variety should be counterbalanced by the uniformity of legislation, so that social order be well established.*[2]

The political problem as Maimonides sees it is how to regulate the affairs of human beings in such a way as to respect their individuality while not creating chaos. A similar point emerges from a surprising rabbinic teaching: "Our Rabbis taught: If one sees a crowd of Israelites, one says: Blessed Be He who discerns secrets – because the mind of each is different from that of another, just as the face of each is different from another" (Brachot 58a).

We would have expected a blessing over a crowd to emphasise its size, its mass: human beings in their collectivity.[3] A crowd is a group large enough for the individuality of the faces to be lost. Yet the blessing stresses the opposite – that each member of a crowd is still an individual with distinctive thoughts, hopes, fears, and aspirations.

The same was true for the relationship between the Sages. A Mishnah states: *When R. Meir died, the composers of fables ceased. When Ben Azzai died, assiduous students ceased. When Ben Zoma died, the expositors ceased. When R. Akiva died, the glory of the Torah ceased. When R. Chanina died, men of deed ceased. When R. Yose Ketanta died, the pious men ceased. When R. Yochanan b. Zakai died, the lustre of wisdom ceased.... When Rabbi died, humility and the fear of sin ceased.* (Mishnah Sotah 9:15)

There was no single template of the Sage. Each had his own distinctive merits, his unique contribution to the collective heritage. In this respect, the Sages were merely continuing the tradition of the Torah itself. There is no single role model of the religious hero or heroine in Tanach. The patriarchs and matriarchs each had their own unmistakable character. Moses, Aaron, and Miriam each emerge as different personality types. Kings, Priests, and Prophets had different roles to play in Israelite society. Even among the Prophets, "No two prophesy in the same style," said the Sages (Sanhedrin 89a). Elijah was zealous, Elisha gentle. Hosea speaks of love, Amos speaks of justice. Isaiah's visions are simpler and less opaque than those of Ezekiel.

The same applies to even to the revelation at Sinai itself. Each individual heard, in the same words, a different inflection:

*The voice of the Lord is with power (Ps. 29:4): that is, according to the power of each individual, the young, the old, and the very small ones, each according to their power [of understanding]. God said to Israel, "Do not believe that there are many gods in heaven because you heard many voices. Know that I alone am the Lord your God."*[4]

According to Maharsha, there are 600,000 interpretations of Torah. Each individual is theoretically capable of a unique insight into its meaning. The French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas commented: *The Revelation has a particular way of producing meaning, which lies in its calling upon the unique within me. It is as if a multiplicity of persons...were the condition for the plenitude of "absolute truth," as if each person, by virtue of his own uniqueness, were able to guarantee the revelation of one unique aspect of the truth, so that some of its facets would never have been revealed if certain people had been absent from mankind.*[5]

Judaism, in short, emphasises the other side of the *maxim E pluribus unum* ("Out of the

many, one"). It says: "Out of the One, many."

The miracle of creation is that unity in heaven produces diversity on earth. Torah is the rain that feeds this diversity, allowing each of us to become what only we can be.

[1] Sifrei, Ha'azinu 306. [2] Maimonides, Guide for the Perplexed, II:40. [3] See Elias Canetti, Crowds and Power (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973). [4] Exodus Rabbah 29:1. [5] Emmanuel Levinas, "Revelation in the Jewish Tradition," in The Levinas Reader, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001), 190–210.

### Israel is a Purpose by Dr. Shaiya Rothberg

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1xMm9QdBRAV-VVieOYN56KC1Y7\\_Ti2mkCXSLE\\_EnQ0zQ/edit#](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1xMm9QdBRAV-VVieOYN56KC1Y7_Ti2mkCXSLE_EnQ0zQ/edit#)

In this week's parashah, the people of Israel stand poised to enter the Promised Land after generations of tribulations. At this critical juncture, God has Moshe teach us a song: Ha'azinu. The song must be "in our mouths" (Devarim 31:19) until we know it "word for word" (Ibn Ezra). It sounds like God and Moshe want us to chant Ha'azinu like a mantra as we cross the river Jordan to take on the responsibilities of a nation in the Land.

Rav Kook echoes this motif in his "Fourfold Song" according to which the People Israel herself is a song: The Song of God. It is a song, and not a philosophy, because while it expresses truth it also pulses through our bodies as only music can. We sing the song with the fullness of our minds and bodies to awaken humanity to her highest moral and spiritual potential. This is the divine purpose of Israel for Rav Kook.

Ha'azinu, too, is a song, and thus involves our hearts, our souls and everything we've got. The words tell a story: We will cross the river, inhabit the land, and enjoy prosperity. In our prosperity, we will forget God, betray our purpose, and therefore nearly be destroyed. In the end, we will return to God and be consoled (Devarim 32:43, following Rashi).

Why should this be our mantra? Because it instructs us that Israel is not – and must never be – merely a people, a religion or a land. Israel is a purpose. The song teaches that our divine purpose is not just our responsibility but also the source of our collective life and inspiration. Perhaps the divine punishment described in the song is the natural consequence: If we commit the sin of karet – cutting ourselves off from the roots of our purpose – then our "punishment" is that we are cut off from that which is the source of our life.

The song clarifies what divine attributes we must embody to fulfill our purpose: "Yeah, a faithful God, without iniquity, Just and upright is S/He" (Devarim 32:4). As we cross the Jordan to establish a political system and economy, the song demands that we remember the divine attribute of justice, through which Zion will be redeemed (Isaiah 1:27).

But with so many disagreements about its meaning, is not "justice" an empty word? I believe that this common argument is mistaken. We wildly exaggerate disagreements about justice. Throughout history, most people who shared language and territory also shared a sense of justice regarding many crucial issues. In our days, the sword, the dollar, and the digital word have transformed humanity into a species that shares both common languages and a common global interdependent territory. I believe we also share a sense of justice regarding certain critical points.

It seems clear that almost all people alive today believe they have human rights, such as the right to an adequate standard of living and protection from discrimination, and want their rights respected. In fact, the stories we tell about the alleged threats posed by minorities or immigrants to justify violating their rights implicitly recognize that were these threats not real then our behavior would be wrong.

Similarly, we tell stories about borders, sovereignty and private property to normalize our collective choice to leave trillions of dollars in the bank while billions of humans suffer unnecessarily. Our need to tell these tall tales implicitly recognizes that were they not true – or were they merely insignificant in the face of human suffering – we'd be obligated to invest what it takes to eradicate poverty.

We lack justice not because we don't know what it is, or can't afford it, but because the

stories we tell obfuscate our responsibility. We Jews today must serve our purpose by utilizing the story-telling genius of our people to offer new stories that embody the message of Ha'azinu and motivate the struggle to eradicate all discrimination and poverty. Our Jewish communities contain vast spiritual energy. We must utilize that energy to sound the Song of Israel, with the clarity and force of a shofar blast, to our human sisters and brothers across the globe. *(Dr. Rothberg is on the Conservative Yeshiva Faculty)*

### Slow Change by Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1xMm9QdBRAV-VVieOYN56KC1Y7\\_Ti2mkCXSLE\\_EnQ0zQ/edit#](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1xMm9QdBRAV-VVieOYN56KC1Y7_Ti2mkCXSLE_EnQ0zQ/edit#)

Paralleling the song of Parashat Ha'azinu, the haftarah this week is David's victory song from the penultimate chapter of the books of Shmuel. The same song is also found in the book of Tehillim (chapter 18) with minor variations. The last verse of this song is well known liturgically since it is recited at the end of Birkat Hamazon – the Grace After Meals. On Shabbat and holidays, we say the version from Shmuel: "A tower (migdol) of salvation is He (God) to His king, keeping faith with His anointed, for David and his seed, forever" (22:51), while on weekdays, we say the version from Tehillim: "Making great (magdil) the salvation of the king, keeping faith with His anointed, for David and his seed, forever." (18:51)"

The difference between these two versions is due to the tradition that the word made up of the letters "mem", "gimel", "daled", "yod", "lamed" should be read (kri) differently than it is written (k'tiv). Tehillim, following the way the word is written, renders it "magdil."

Shmuel, following how it is read, renders it "migdol" (the "yod" is changed to a "vav"). Despite the Tehillim version (magdil) being more accurate/authentic than the Shmuel version (migdol), the simple meaning (p'shat) of migdol fits the context of the song better, since it is better coordinated with the imagery of the poem which often utilizes "stronghold" metaphors throughout to describe God. (Alter, The Hebrew Bible)

The Tehillim version (magdil), on the other hand, requires/invites rabbinic interpretation (d'rash). In Midrash Tehillim, Rabbi Yudan says: Since redemption does not come upon this people in a single moment, but rather a little at a time. So, what is the meaning of "magdil"? – that the redemption will grow gradually before Israel, for currently, Israel lives with great troubles, and if redemption were to come in a single moment, they would not be able to suffer it. This is why redemption is likened to dawn since it is never darker than immediately before dawn, and if the sun were to appear in a single moment, while everyone was asleep, fear would overcome them. Instead, the morning begins with a pillar of light before the sun gradually rises, leaving no one frightened." (adapted from Midrash Tehillim, Buber ed. p. 162)

Rabbi Yudan uses this textual curiosity as a means to teach us that redemption is ideally a process, an evolution of sorts. Otherwise, he notes, it would be destructive rather than productive. In this age of instant gratification, this is a powerful lesson that "slow change" - though frustrating - is ultimately the most sustainable. *(Rabbi Silverstein is on the faculty of the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem)*

### This is My Decree by Raymond Scheindlin

<http://www.jtsa.edu/this-is-my-decree>

After surveying the 40 years of wandering in the desert; after reviewing and expanding the laws that God had given the Israelites during that period; and after repeating the terms of the covenant between God and Israel with its promises of a long and prosperous life in their own land if they fulfill God's commands and its threats of impoverishment and expulsion if they fail to fulfill them, Moses now sums up his message in a poem designed to be memorized and recited regularly so that it might easily and reliably be transmitted from generation to generation. The poem, which occupies most of this week's parashah, was intended to be an educational tool. Memorizing it and reciting it would keep the terms of the covenant alive in the minds and hearts of the Israelites forever.

Those of us who attended public school in the 1940s and 1950s were educated at the end of a period that began in prehistoric times with oral literary composition, when people

were educated by memorizing things, particularly poetry. Well I remember the panic that would transfix a junior high school class when the teacher announced that she or he was about to call on individual pupils to recite the 20 lines of Tennyson or Macaulay that had been assigned us. The panic was temporary, but the lines that we memorized as children or teenagers were fixed in us permanently. In later life, those lines have sometimes provided a message that we needed to hear or a form of expression for feelings or ideas for which we failed to find words of our own. Likewise in Hebrew school, we were drilled to memorize the prayers and passages from the Bible in Hebrew. Tedious work it may have seemed at the time, but it had the lasting effect of making us comfortable with the Hebrew language and at home among the fundamental texts of the Jewish tradition. An educator with his eye on the future of his people, Moses knew that his poem was more likely to last in the minds of future generations than any abstract enunciations of lofty principles or any class discussion of the pros and cons of the covenant.

Poetry continued to be one of the major forms of Jewish literary activity in later generations as well. Hebrew poets in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages produced a vast quantity of poetry on biblical themes, expanding the stories and laws of the Bible as the authors of the Talmud and Midrash did, but expressing these expansions and elaborations in Hebrew verse. And since Moses spent his last day declaiming and teaching poems (Ha'azinu and the following poem containing Moses's final blessings), it is only appropriate that Moses's last day became the subject of a number of poems composed during this period when Hebrew poetry flourished.

A poem by Pinehas Hakohen, who lived in Tiberias in the eighth century, explores Moses's resistance to the prospect of death by imagining a dialogue between Moses and God.\* It is a delight to observe this nearly perfect servant of God behaving exactly like one of us ordinary mortals when faced with extinction. Moses has just heard God's command to go up on the mountain on that very day and die, (Deut. 32:48) and he protests:

*I will not die!  
Why should I die?  
O God, just tell me,  
What complaint have You with me?*

Moses may be the man of God (33:1) who split the sea, stood on Mount Sinai, and shepherded his people through the desert for 40 years, but in these lines he sounds like any one of us in his denial and in his demand for an explanation of the great mystery of death. Confronted with death, Moses is just a man who wants a little more time. He reviews his life, looking for sins for which God may be punishing him, and for each, he offers an explanation or an excuse in hope of a reprieve. "If," he says to God, "you are punishing me for killing the Egyptian who struck an Israelite slave (Exod. 2:12); well, I actually had a good reason for that," and he goes on to offer his excuse. But that excuse is of no interest to God, whose answer, like the decree itself is a riddle:

*This is not this.  
Why this? Not this!  
Go up, Moses and die.  
This is My decree.*

Stanza by stanza, Moses raises six possible reasons for the decree, and for each he has an excuse or an explanation. God rejects each in turn: None of these acts was actually a sin, and some were even praiseworthy. Each of Moses's protests begins with the opening lines quoted above; each of God's responses ends with His maddening riddle and its unanswerable climax: This is My decree.

We readers might view Moses's list as the things that weigh on his conscience as he reviews his life. He views his death not as the fate of all mankind but as uniquely his fate; he racks his brains seeking a cause in his own behavior and an excuse in his intentions. With the sixth and last suggestion—his behavior at the rock—Moses comes very close to

the truth as the Torah tells it: God sentenced him to die and not enter the Land of Canaan as punishment for his behavior when he was ordered to satisfy the Israelites' thirst by bidding a boulder bring forth water. (Num. 20:2-13) To this item, God replies:

*I have sworn and it is inscribed.*

*For this it has been decreed,*

At last the maddeningly vague word "this" that was repeated so insistently in the refrain has acquired a specific meaning. "This" is the episode of the rock. But we still do not know just what Moses did wrong on that occasion; the text of the Torah is unclear on that point and it is disputed by commentators ancient and modern. Not only does the poet make no attempt to clarify Moses's sin, he seems to taunt Moses—and us readers—by harping on the word "this," and ending with the theme of the divine decree:

*Here is this!*

*Know that it is for this,*

*For this, Moses, die!*

*For my decree is that you will die.*

We were told all along that Moses will die on account of God's decree, but not why God made the decree. Now, though Moses has at least identified the occasion that brought about the decree, we have only the vaguest idea of the reason.

Every aspect of the composition of the poem until this point is designed to stress that God's decree is God's decree—inscrutable and irreversible. Moses has hit a blank wall. He will never know the reason for his death. And in this respect he is exactly like the rest of mankind. We die for no reason other than God's decree.

Moses now appears to accept this principle, but he is not ready to accept his death, for he has one ambition that is still unfulfilled: to see the Promised Land. In this too he resembles the rest of us. We hate the idea of our own extinction, but our hatred for that inevitability is exacerbated by the thought that we will never know what happens next in the story in which we have participated throughout our lives. What will become of our children and grandchildren? What will become of our city, our language, our country, the world? What technological development is next? What medical discovery? Is God so ungenerous as to deny us even a glimpse of that future?

Moses begins each of the remaining four stanzas with an altered version of the opening lines:

*If for this I die,*

*Let me enter and die!*

He bargains with God: Let me enter the Land, live there for a year or two and then die! God makes a counteroffer: If you insist on entering the Land, do so, but then I will block the Israelites from entering and they will have to wander the desert forever. God knows that Moses could never doom his people to eternal exile. Moses then suggests that God let him enter the Land through underground tunnels so that God could evade his own oath that Moses would never cross over the Jordan river (Deut. 31:2). God counters that Moses's life span was decreed long ago to be 120 years, no more and no less. Moses offers to enter the Land as a servant while Joshua leads the people in his place. God now begs Moses not to bargain with him: To resist is not worthy of Moses's stature or his reputation as man of humble piety. He must know that God does not decree death lightly. He should accept his fate with dignity, in a spirit of submission.

Unable to abandon his desire to see the Holy Land, Moses reaches for the fantastic. He begs: "Transform me into a fish in the Jordan so that I might at least glimpse the Holy Land while swimming; transform me into a cloud so that I might glimpse the Holy Land from above."

God has had enough; He puts an end to the entire argument with a speech that humanizes Himself without conceding an iota of His transcendence. God confesses that He has found Moses's speeches beautiful, but He demands obedience. He will make Moses's death a sweetness rather than the horror that it is for ordinary men, for Moses

will die by the divine kiss. God regrets His own decree, but His decree it is, and even God is bound by it.

What more consolation could a man on the point of death want than these touching words?

*An end to beautiful words,  
Speech without blemish!  
Yield to my power.  
Die at the kiss of my mouth.  
Beloved and trustworthy friend despite this—  
Do not go on saying this.  
Sorry I am that I decreed this,  
But what can I do? Decreed is this.*

(Raymond Scheindlin is Professor Emeritus of Medieval Hebrew Literature at JTS)

[From the Plain Text to Philosophy by By Dov Schwartz](#)

<https://www1.biu.ac.il/indexE.php?id=18618&pt=1&pid=14647&level=0&cPath=43,14206,14376,14647,18618>

Jewish philosophy over the years has had a solid common basis—relating to sacred texts, that is, to passages from the Bible and interpretations of the Sages. Here we must investigate whether these texts indeed reflect what has been anchored on them throughout the years. Was there truly justification for centuries of philosophers (such as Rabbi Judah Halevy or Maimonides) to hang their ideas on Scripture? At least a considerable number of them, if not all, were convinced that they were revealing the truth. Yet it can be said that there is no essential connection between the plain sense of the text and what they hung on it. However, to me it seems that the plain sense of Scripture can be seen as the beginning point of a process at the end of which one finds the philosopher. In other words, the underlying frame of the plain sense of Scripture forms a solid foundation on which the edifice of philosophical ideas is built. I would like to point out briefly some ideas that devolved from the scriptural text and became issues of weight and importance in Jewish thought.

This week's reading begins with the words:

Give ear, O heavens, let me speak; let the earth hear the words I utter. May my discourse come down as the rain, my speech distill as the dew.

The idea of addressing heaven and earth because they are constant and everlasting—eternal witnesses, as it were—dates back to ancient commentaries. Of course we are dealing with poetry, but these words of the Torah have opened the way to ponderous philosophical questions that have occupied Jewish thought for centuries. The basic intuition of the poem is that heaven and earth—created bodies, as the Torah attests in its first chapter—are eternal and therefore can be addressed to provide constant testimony. But can there be any eternal bodies alongside the Lord? Was not Divine perfection, at least in the thought of the Middle Ages, perceived in such a way that the Lord is primal and eternal? Is it possible to conceive of two eternal bodies aside from Him—heaven and earth? Therefore, more than a few thinkers maintained that the world is destroyed in every cycle of years and then built anew. In other words, they sided with a cyclic view of the universe. The approach that the world is cyclic is found in the writings of the Sages: Rabbi Judah b. Rabbi Simon: “Let there be evening” is not written here, but And there was evening: hence we know that a time-order existed before this. Rabbi Abbahu said: This proves that the Holy One, blessed be He, went on creating worlds and destroying them until He created this one and declared, “This one pleases Me; those did not please Me.” (Genesis Rabbah 3.7)

Even Rabbi Judah Halevy's writings present a cyclic notion of worlds, at least as a possibility:

If, after all, a believer in the Law finds himself compelled to admit an eternal matter and the existence of many worlds prior to this one, this would not impair his belief that this world was created at a certain epoch, and that Adam and Noah were the first human

beings. (Kuzari 1.67)[1]

The Kabbalah incorporated this approach in its theory of Shemitahs. Sefer ha-Temunah, apparently written in Byzantine areas in the early fourteenth century, was explicit about the cyclic nature of worlds: The world goes according to cycles of seven thousand years at the end of which, in the Jubilee year, which is the fifty-thousandth year, the world returns to its Divine source. Some kabbalists even sought to extend this theory to explain the findings of paleontology (the study of fossils).

The theory of cyclic worlds, however, also poses a theological difficulty. The Holy One, blessed be He, created the world, and He fashioned it as the best of all possible worlds (à la Maimonides, Leibniz, and others). Chapter 1 of Genesis repeatedly stresses that the Lord's work was "good" or "very good." Yet the world He created does not "hold up," and in a certain sense He Himself destroys it. How can this act of destroying be reconciled with Divine perfection? Therefore, in Guide for the Perplexed (2.28), Maimonides claimed that the Holy One, blessed be He, created the world, but that thenceforth the world is eternal. Moreover, Maimonides was of the opinion that when a person or a scientist observes the world, the world appears to him to follow primal and eternal laws. In other words, the Holy One, blessed be He, created the world but imbued it with everlasting laws of nature.

Getting back to the plain sense of Scripture, we find that the poet appeals to bodies that appear not only more sublime than anything else—heaven and earth—but also that endure more than anything else at hand. Now we must explore the relationship between the first verse and the second in this week's reading. Rashi comments:

This is what you are to testify: That I say to you: I gave Israel the Torah, which is everlasting life just as the rain is everlasting, just as the heavens shower down rain and dew.

In other words, Rashi held that the second verse to be analogous to the previous one. Just as heaven and earth are eternal, so, too rain gives life to the world eternally.

According to the plain sense one could just as well say that the verse is directed at the connection between heaven and earth. That is to say, in the first verse Scripture juxtaposed heaven to earth, and in the second, the word of G-d connects these two bodies one to the other: the word of the Holy One, blessed be He, comes down from above (cf. Isa. 55:10). Here, too, over the years philosophers have filled in the nature of this tie. Scripture uses Hebrew expressions that suit precipitation that comes down from the atmosphere.

Philosophers have pondered how Divine bounty or the word of the Lord comes down from on high. It was clear to them that one could not equate the word of G-d on high (in the "heavens") with the word of G-d in the material world. Some maintained that there are various degrees in the world of the Divine, and that the world of G-d comes down stage by stage, until it is suited to the earthly world.

Many kabbalists described the Hebrew language as a font of ideas that take form in the lofty realm of the Divine, and these ideas then crystalize into letters, words, and sentences. Many intellectuals of the Middle Ages described the functioning of the material world as the result of Divine abundance, comparing it to water that flows down from above. The theory of infinite abundance became a focal point of controversy. One group of thinkers at the dawn of systematic medieval Jewish thought, among them Rabbi Isaac Israeli, Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gevirol and Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra, took in the notion of infinite abundance. Maimonides adopted it with a measure of reserve, and Rabbi Levi ben Gershom (Ralbag), for one, rejected it on the level of cosmic entities. Both of them were convinced that there is a relationship between heaven and earth, and that both nature and the Torah are anchored in the Divine source. From this point many thinkers turned to consider prophecy, seeking to explain it according to the principle of infinite Divine abundance.

Perhaps the plain sense of the text enables us to draw a generalized conclusion about

the structure of the Torah. In the Torah, the poem, Haazinu, essentially concludes Moses' direct oration to the entire Israelite people. After this poem come Moses' blessings to the tribes, individually addressed to each tribe, followed by the account of his passing. In terms of content, the concluding poem begins with a cosmic statement about heaven and earth, and the word of the Lord which forms the link between them. Thus we can say that the Holy One, blessed be He, sought to begin and end the Torah with the cosmic. Note that the Torah begins with the story of Creation and ends with the poem of Creation, at least in the first verse of Haazinu. Is this hinting that we should occupy ourselves with the structure of the universe? To be sure, the Torah is for the most part a book of instruction, commands, and narratives about our forefathers. But it begins and ends with the universe. This may well enfold a bidding to human beings to recognize the importance of understanding the universe.

To be sure, the plain sense of Scripture does not include the complex theories to which we briefly alluded. But there can be no doubt that it represents the beginning of a process, one might even say a continuous process: from Scripture, to the homilies of the Sages, and from the homilies of the Sages to philosophical commentary relying on scientific sources of the times. Thinkers such as Rabbi Judah Halevi, Maimonides, and Ralbag approached Scripture armed with the scientific knowledge of their day and were convinced that the sacred text reflected this knowledge. Be that as it may, the greatness of Scripture lies in its being able to encompass different views and allow for a wide variety of interpretations. *(Prof. Dov Schwartz heads the Zerah Wahrhaftig Institute for Research on Religious Zionism, Department of Jewish Philosophy, Bar Ilan University. Translated by Rachel Rowen)*

### Yahrtzeits

Dan Anbar remembers his father Shmuel Bernstein (Shmuel be Menachem-Mendel and Feige) on Saturday October 12th (Tishri 13)

Bob Woog remembers his father Cornelius M. Woog (Mordecai ben Avraham) on Tuesday October 15th (Tishri 16)

Rich Cohen remembers his father William Cohen (Zev ben Dov Ber ha Cohen v'Esther) on Tuesday October 15th (Tishri 16)

Irwin Primer remembers his sister Rose Rand on Friday October 18th (Tishri 19)