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The Song of Unconditional Love

The Torah ends with a song - but not the kind you'd expect. Moses's final prophecy, written in the distinctive two-column format of biblical poetry, doesn't celebrate triumph or offer hope. Instead, it predicts failure, exile, and national catastrophe with absolute certainty.

Why would our greatest prophet choose this harsh message as his farewell declaration? And why deliver it as a song?

The Song of Destiny

At first glance, Moses's prophecy in this week's Torah portion reads like a sobering tale of human failure that unfolds in four acts. First, God showers His chosen nation with kindness - rescuing them from Egypt, nurturing them in the desert, bringing them into the Promised Land. Then, in act two, at the height of their prosperity, the people grow fat with comfort and turn away from their Creator. This leads to the devastating third act: God's presence withdraws and catastrophe follows: wicked enemies scatter the Jewish people to the corners of the earth. Finally, God avenges His people and cleanses their land.

What makes this prophecy unique is its certainty. Most biblical warnings speak in conditional terms - "If you sin, then consequences will follow." *Bechukotai* and *Ki Savo* offer clear choices with predictable outcomes, giving us agency over our destiny. But this week's Torah portion strips away all conditions. These events will happen, period.

And indeed, the Ramban points out that everything in this prophecy has unfolded exactly as written: God rescued us from Egypt, protected us in the wilderness, brought us to Israel, and blessed us with success. Then, we grew arrogant, sinned, and suffered a painful exile. Given this flawless track record, the Ramban concludes, we can be absolutely certain about the final act of redemption.

But there's a troubling detail buried in this promise. According to the prophecy, we don't earn this redemption through repentance or merit. God saves us simply to vindicate His own name before

the nations. Are we really just helpless cases, destined to fail and be rescued only because our enemies are worse?

Love Without Limits

The Malbim offers a stunning parable that unlocks the deeper meaning of this song: A king decides to free a slave who has a well-known history of theft. Despite knowing the slave's character flaws, the king appoints him treasurer of the royal vault. But here's the twist: before giving the slave this position, the king writes a note in his private ledger stating, "I know this man will steal from me." Why does the king write this prediction? Not to warn the slave or prevent the theft, but to remind his future self not to punish the slave when the inevitable happens. After all, the king made this appointment with full knowledge of what would occur. The responsibility lies with the one who chose, not the one who acts according to his nature.¹

This parable reveals the true message of *Haazinu*: we have a Father who believes in us and loves us unconditionally. The prophecy doesn't seek to crush us with inevitability, but to assure us that even at our lowest, we're never truly lost.

The Talmud² records a fundamental debate that reinforces this theme. Rabbi Yehuda argues that our status as God's children depends on our behavior: "When you act like sons and cleave to the Holy One, you are called sons, but when you do not act like sons, you are not called sons." Rabbi Meir forcefully disagrees: "Either way you are still called sons!" He proves his point by citing verses where God calls Israel "sons" even

while criticizing them - "foolish sons," "sons in whom there is no faithfulness," "sons who deal corruptly." Even at our worst, the Torah never stops calling us God's children. The law is decisive: we follow Rabbi Meir. No matter what, we remain God's children.

I once heard an interview with NBA legend Kobe Bryant about his father's role in his basketball career. Kobe described his experience playing in a summer league at age eleven. He scored zero points the entire summer. After his final game, he approached his father, devastated. His father wrapped his arm around young Kobe and said, "Son, I love you whether you score 0 or you score 60." Smiling during the interview, Kobe exclaimed, "I said to myself, 'Cool, I've got the love, now I'm going to go score 60.'" He went on to become one of the greatest scorers of all time.

That's the power of unconditional love. When we internalize this certainty and feel God's arm wrapped around us, we gain the strength to brush off our zero-point days and strive for our full potential. The song's harsh predictions don't chain us to failure - they create the ultimate safety net, freeing us to reach for the stars. Rock bottom doesn't mark the end - it offers a new beginning, backed by the certainty of God's eternal love. In that light, *Haazinu* isn't just a prophecy - it's our Father's eternal promise that no matter how far we fall, His love will always be there to lift us back up.

Embracing Our Zero-Point Days

This understanding transforms how we approach both our own failures and those of others. When you face your next setback, pause and ask: "How

would I speak to someone I love unconditionally about this situation?" Then extend that same compassion to yourself. God's love doesn't fluctuate with your performance, and neither should your self-worth.

Now comes the harder challenge: extending this same unconditional love to others. Just as Kobe's father wrapped his arm around his devastated son, we can become sources of unwavering support for the people in our lives. The next time someone disappoints you - your child, student, friend, or spouse - remember the Malbim's insight. You entered this relationship knowing human nature. Your role isn't to punish the inevitable stumbles; it's to love through them and help the person rise again.

May we all find strength and peace in the unconditional love that God surrounds us with, no matter whether we succeed or fail!

Shabbat Shalom!

Avraham

1. Malbim on Deuteronomy 31:19
2. Kiddushin 36a



Here and Now

In this week's portion, God tells Moses to ascend Mount Nevo where he is to die "in the middle of the day." The Sages explain that the Jewish people had decided they were not letting Moses go without a fight. He had taken them out of Egypt, split the sea, given them the Torah and provided manna for 40 years. Who wants a terrific leader like that to move on?

That explains why God took Moses "in the middle of the day" - to show the Jewish people that no one could stop Him from taking Moses back.

Now here's a paradox: During Moses' lifetime, the Jewish people complained about his leadership over and over again. And yet, when push came to shove, they were desperate for him to stay.

Human beings, and most especially we Jews, love to hang on to the past. We are always challenged to enjoy the now because the past, once it's gone, always seems so much rosier. Appreciating the now is our greatest challenge. The truth is, though, that the now is all that we have. Our life is lived only in the now. The past exists only in our memory; the future only in our imagination. All that we have is every precious, but fleeting,

moment through which we experience our lives. And nostalgia can so easily make the "now" seem so miserable.

The truth is that after Moses was gone, the Jewish people did fine. New and different leaders came along who led each generation with their own unique set of capabilities. The Jewish people grew, developed and thrived - all without Moses to lead them. In retrospect, keeping Moses alive was not the solution for them. The solution was to come to terms with the incredible possibilities that remained even when he was not there.

Tradition and respect for the past is a key part of Jewish life, and crucial for moving forward in our national mission of repairing the world. But when we are overly concerned about holding onto what is in the past, that can cloud our perception of the new possibilities that exist in the here and now.

Life is what we make of the moments we are given. And every moment is of equal potential. The past and future are no better than today. In the grandest of all equalities, all moments are created completely equal in their potential for us to realize the rich and varied - infinite, in fact - possibilities that God constantly places before us.

God is not in the past, nor is He in the future; He is outside of time. He exists only in the timeless 'now' that every moment provides. God is right here, right now. Why would we want to live anywhere else?



Tell Your Children

Every Passover, in keeping with the theme of Divine intervention and redemption, my family has a custom at our seder table for each person to tell of instances where his or her own life was saved from danger.

One year, among our guests was a mother and her teenage daughter. The mother told a fascinating, dramatic story that had taken place during her youth. As impressed as we all were by the story, her daughter was even more impressed - because **this was the first time she had heard** this bit of family history! Noting the daughter's reaction, many of us at the table began to marvel about all the great stories that frequently go unshared between parents and their children.

The subject of **sharing experiences with one's children** is a prominent theme in this week's Torah portion, Ha'azinu. Much of the parsha is written as a "song" that describes the future recalcitrance toward God. Prophesizing that the Jewish people will forget God and His commandments, Moses describes the various afflictions that may come about. In the future, the Jewish people will push God's protective shelter away from them - and then wonder where God

has gone! Finally in the midst of their suffering, the people will return to their connection with God.

The purpose of these verses, though, is not simply to prophesize about the future. Rather it is to serve "as a witness" to prevent the Jewish people from future misdeeds. Paradoxically, it is meant to **prevent the very events that it is predicting will happen!** The hope is that if we take to heart the warnings in the Torah, the dreaded consequences it predicts will not occur. It is primary to Jewish belief that prophecies of punishment can be nullified if people change their ways.

To help facilitate its transmission, this section - in addition to being read annually as one of the weekly Torah portions - was sung each week in the Temple by the Levites.

But the efficacy of this message obviously depends upon it being passed down accurately through the generations. In the view of certain commentators, it is a **special mitzvah for parents to share experiences with their children.** This is how we strengthen our connection to them and give them the best opportunities to learn about life. The Torah itself says: "Ask your father and he will relate it to you and your elders and they will tell you" (Deut. 32:7). Ultimately it is through the experiences of one's parents that one can come to better know oneself ... and the ways of God.



Defying Death with Life

In his 1973 Pulitzer Prize winning book "The Denial of Death," anthropologist Ernest Becker argued that subconsciously, we are so terrified of death, that everything we do, without even necessarily being aware of it, is in some way trying to deny the fact that we will die.

Based on Becker's work, psychologists Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, and Tom Pyszczynski formulated what they call terror management theory (TMT). Their goal is to demonstrate through research that we behave differently when reminded, either subtly or explicitly, of death-related concepts. Hundreds of studies of TMT have been conducted, many situated near funeral homes and cemeteries. One of the primary results of these studies is that when we are reminded of death, we manage the anxiety that comes along with such "terror" by thinking and behaving in such ways that build self-esteem and encourage us to invest in our value system.

As Moses prophesizes in about the eventual misdeeds of the Children of Israel and the consequential punishments, he laments that "if they were to be wise, they would understand this; they would reflect upon their fate – [yavinu

acharitam]" (Devarim 32:29). The basic understanding of the verse is that if the Children of Israel would be aware and mindful of the heavy costs of their actions, they would choose the course of their behavior more wisely.

Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv, known as the Alter of Kelm, adds an additional level of interpretation in his work, "*Chochma U'Mussar*" (1:35). The fate [*acharitam*] that they should reflect upon is the ultimate fate of all of us, namely, death. As Rabbi Eliezer recommends (Talmud Shabbos 153a), we should repent every day, because who knows if tomorrow will be our last? Rabbi Ziv implores us to constantly bring awareness of death into our consciousness. This can raise our consciousness of our actions and motivate us to live a life based on our ultimate values.

In a captivating address launching the publication of the Koren Sukkot Machzor, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks suggested that this is the core message of Ecclesiastes. The most prominent word in the holy work is *hevel*, which Rabbi Sacks translates not as futile or vanity as most do, but as a shallow or fleeting breath. The running theme in the book is that we may be able to accomplish and accumulate a lot in this world, but in the end, we are all a breath away from death.

The first person to die in Tanach is *Hevel*, who is killed by his brother *Kayin*. *Kayin*'s name comes from the concept of acquisition. Many look to acquiring goods in order to assuage the anxiety that the fragility of life presents. But material acquisition, King Solomon contends, is not the way to confront the existential anxiety. The true way to defeat the terror that comes from

awareness of death is through *simcha* – by living in the moment, by being mindful of the present, and enjoying what you are given and can experience in the here and now, despite the fact that the present moment is fleeting.

This pairs well, Rabbi Sacks argued, with the message of the holiday of Sukkot as well. A Sukkah by definition is a temporary structure. The *simcha* of Sukkot is to rejoice in the temporary and in the insecurity.

When confronted by the inevitability of death, let us respond by maximizing our time, living a life guided by Torah and mitzvot, and being mindful – i.e., enjoying the *simcha* that is afforded by living in the present.

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