

Haazinu

He was 13 and pudgy, standing in a suit that itched, bought from Bobby's Clothing Store on Canal Street. Bobby's specialized in outfitting husky boys. He was thinking more about the *kiddush* that was to follow, than what he was doing. It was his Bar Mitzvah day and he was reading (or more accurately, reciting from memory) the Torah portion- *Haazinu*. Thank God and his birth date - it was really short. The *aliyot* were just a few verses long. He was doubly lucky, because Mr. Rappoport had insisted in his antiquated way, that the entire seventh grade, each and every one, learn Haazinu by heart. As classmate after classmate struggled to recite the right words, he could, with just the inkling of a smirk, rattle it off. To be fair to him, he had to learn a special trope for Haazinu. That was burden enough. But it had become part of him. And every year thereafter, when he could, he would chant the poem in any synagogue that would have him.

He was chanting Moses' great ode; Haazinu. ***“Give ear, O heavens, let me speak; Let the earth hear the words I utter!”*** A visionary's poem! Breathtaking scope! Peoples destinies decided! The fate of nations hanging in the balance! The Bar Mitzvah boy understood little of it. Everyone said it was too tough to understand anyway. Even Mr. Rappoport said so. Maybe Mr. Rappoport had assigned it by heart, because of the verses at the end of Haazinu; ***“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;*** Mr. Rappoport took such things seriously. This was no trifling matter. He would have it be part of us. Memorized.

When Moses delivered Haazinu he didn't have to learn it by heart. He knew it by heart. The words came from his heart. They were his. Moses just spoke the poem, teaching as he went. Moshe *Rabaynu*; our peerless teacher who against all odds had brought the people Israel to the very edge of The Promised Land. Moses, who maneuvered between an ingrate people and their explosive ally who had more than once threatened to destroy them all. Moses, master mover of men and yes, let it be said, of God. Gods friend and intimate; awesome leader of Gods People. Yet at the end of the ode, in full view of the promise about to be realized, Moses hears the fateful words the Bar Mitzvah boy dares in his ignorance recite; ***“You shall die on the mountain that you are about to ascend... for you broke faith with Me among the Israelite people, at the waters of Meribath-kadesh in the wilderness of Zin, by***

failing to uphold My sanctity among the Israelite people. You may view the land from a distance, but you shall not enter it...

He didn't understand it when he stood in his Bobby's suit and he doesn't understand it now. How could Moses who envisioned the whole thing, who led the trek through the desert for forty years, be turned away on account of such trivia. OK, so he hit the rock (probably hurt his hand) instead of talking to it, to get water for his people. Big deal!!!! A small thing!!! Too great a punishment for a trivial offense, not forgotten by the God of justice, nor forgiven by the God of compassion. He is denied the prize for not having sanctified God's name in the midst of the people Israel.

He didn't know if he would understand it if he lived to Moses' 120. Nor did he care. It was enough to just get to the end of the Torah Portion without any mistakes. And to get downstairs for the herring in sour cream.

Fifty years later he understands a bit more, though not very much. There have been glimpses of meanings. Learning it by heart did something. It comes in his dreams and enters his musings from time to time. He knows that though the big vision is crucial, little things matter. They count big time. Kind words he said to others, words others offered him, made a difference. A smile, a note, a bit of praise and appreciation all lingered. He knows he liked them when he got them, but though it was so easy, he often failed in giving them. He's learned that though he needs to keep his eye on the goal, he needs to attend to the little things at the same time. And that's a tough balancing act. He's learned that we fail when success is in our grasp and succeed when failure is at the door. And that we are magnificent in both. He's seen that we're both holy and mundane, saint and sinner, generous and stingy, incredibly vicious and supremely kind, each of us and all of us. He's recognized that though we get lost in the little things, we dare not ignore them. For it's in the little things, that we sanctify God's name in the midst of our people.

He understands a bit more and then only sometimes; like Moses we're destined to die without the prize; and that the prizes we do get are often not worth the pursuing. He has seen big prizes lost by small acts. He's noticed that for brief shining moments we succeed, and that we make promises to ourselves that we intend to keep and don't. That things we can't help impede us. And that that's just the way it is. We're more human than not. Over the fifty years he had learned something-- sometimes.

He had learned Haazinu by heart. Mr. Rappoport's pedantic vision and the luck of his birth date had seen to that. Long after his Bar Mitzvah, he was reading

Haazinu in synagogue with the confidence of having done it fifty times. Pretty soon it would be *kiddush* time and he could have some herring in sour cream. But now his wife's caring concern about animal fat would deny him that prize too. Still, he could taste the herring as the words, planted in him long ago, came out of his mouth. He had never guessed and didn't know now, how they would bloom.