



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Ha'azinu 5769

By Rachel Farbiarz
September 26, 2009

*"It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there."*

~William Carlos Williams (from "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower")

The Pentateuch's penultimate portion, *Parshat Ha'azinu*, memorializes the "Song of Moses," canted by the great leader on the day of his death. An epic poem in six parts,¹ *Ha'azinu* tells of God's enduring relationship with Israel, unfurling their stormy entanglements into both desert past and prophetic future.

Its recitation Moses's last pedagogic act, the song-poem figures largely in the great leader's final preparations for death. Moses schools the entire assembly in its verses, satisfying God's command that *Ha'azinu's* words "not be forgotten from the mouths of your offspring." And on the day of his death, the relentless scribe writes out the poem in its entirety, instructing the Levites that it be placed in the Sanctuary, next to the Ark of the Covenant.²

There is powerful emotional force to this song-poem. Arranged not in the Torah's typical textual format, *Ha'azinu's* verses instead are presented in columns—the better, one can imagine, to see their words quiver. Even our scrolls seem thus to acknowledge that *Ha'azinu's* power is drawn not from the narrative substance of its verses, but from their form; that the poem holds its audience in thrall through its couplets and cadences; its lurid imagery and outlandish metaphor; its esoteric language of "no-gods" and "no-folk."³

Ha'azinu's verses are less sentences than incantations—a kind of magic that does the heavy lifting of the soul from a posture of attention to one of rapture, from interest to commitment. This is the mysterious work of poetry, rendering Moses's final recitation not a mere collection of words, but "a witness for the children of Israel."⁴

And here is *Ha'azinu's* searing imprint: That words can be witness—to covenant and commitment, trauma and injustice; to the failures of history and to the future's promise. Words do not only narrate and recount: They also *do*. They rebuke indifference and instill commitment. They suspend bridges between worlds and gather people into communities. They compel action.

Since early 2008, when waves of post-election violence wracked Kenya, an extraordinary coalition calling itself the Concerned Kenyan Writers has been leveraging these functions of the word. Shortly after the violence broke out, a

¹ Katz, Shlomo. "Parshas Haazinu: A Song and Its Allusions." *Hamaayan*. 11 October 2008.
<http://www.torah.org/learning/hamaayan/5769/haazinu.html>

² Deuteronomy 31:21-30.

³ Deuteronomy 32:1-43.

⁴ Deuteronomy 31:19.

group of “poets, writers and storytellers” began penning an “alternative account of the violence that shook Kenya.” The writers sought to convey the complexity—and humanity—of what they saw: in the words of Kenyan writer Shalini Gidoomal “to wade into the thick of analysis and discussion during the conflict at a time when sensational, dehumanising images were conveying a simplistic story of barbarism to the world.”⁵

The result was a powerful collection of work—including poetry, testimonials, and short stories—that ultimately became part of the record of the Waki Commission’s inquiry into the violence.⁶ One such piece, “Translated from Kibakizungu” by Wambui Mwangi, urgently plies its audience:

Where is this person who will ... give Kenyans a credible reason to stop this violence and to find new ways of expressing our fears and our frustrations? Who will explain us to each other, who will clarify... our challenges of salvaging and rebuilding our battered selves...? Who will convince us that this untidy, resentful, sullen, bleeding, wounded, bewildered, defensive, psychotic, irrational, betraying, dangerous place we call home, this our Kenya, has any point left to it at all?⁷

Mwangi, I think, has answered her own questions: It is those writers and artists like herself who will “explain us to each other,” compelling action upon such “explanations.”

Opening ourselves to the peculiar power of words is vital to the project of doing justice in a global context. Listening for the songs and poems of those with whom we work in solidarity helps us learn the shape of justice—schooling us in overlooked details and barely-audible stories; teaching us of the complexities and toll of living with violence, disease, want or injustice. Most critically, these words can serve as actors in their own right—unhardening hearts, compelling action, bearing witness.

And it is thus that Moses’s end-of-life supplication is enacted: “Take these words to your heart . . . because it is not an empty thing for you: It is your very life....”⁸



Rachel Farbiarz is a graduate of Harvard College and Yale Law School, as well as of an Orthodox *yeshivah* high school. Rachel worked as a clerk for the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco, after which she practiced law focusing on the civil rights and humane treatment of prisoners. In this role, she helped to improve the basic living conditions on California’s death row at San Quentin. Rachel currently lives with her husband in Washington, D.C., where she works on her own writing and art. Rachel can be reached at rachel.ajws@gmail.com.

⁵ Mushtaq, Najum. “Writing for Peace.” *Inter Press Service News Agency*. 4 August 2008. <http://allafrica.com/stories/200808050007.html>

⁶ Ibid.; Kopecky, Arno. “Kenya: Is the Pen Mightier Than a Machete?” *Pambazuka News: Weekly Forum for Social Justice in Africa*. 10 July 2008. <http://allafrica.com/stories/200807100523.html>

⁷ Mwangi, Wambui. “Translated from Kibakizungu.” *Kwani Trust*. 6 February 2008. <http://kwani.org/main/translated-from-kibakizungu/#more-45>

⁸ Deuteronomy 32:46-47.

©2009 American Jewish World Service

To subscribe to this publication, please visit www.ajws.org/parshah.

The writers of the Dvar Tzedek are the recipients of the Lisa Goldberg Memorial Fellowship. As President of the Charles S. Revson Foundation and as a mother, wife, colleague and friend, Lisa Goldberg had a profound commitment to social justice and the Jewish community. She died tragically at the age of 54. Lisa was a good friend and generous supporter of AJWS, and we hope that, through these words of tzedek, we can contribute to her legacy.

AJWS is committed to a pluralistic view of Judaism and honors the broadest spectrum of interpretation of our texts and traditions. The statements made and views expressed in this commentary are solely the responsibility of the author.

45 West 36th Street, New York, NY 10018 • t 212.792.2900 • f 212.792.2930 • e ajws@ajws.org • www.ajws.org