

Ha'azinu 5773
Reflecting on the Past

Shabbat Shalom.

I hope you all had a meaningful Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

I found that the atmosphere in our congregation was incredibly vibrant and warm. The *davening* was beautiful, the mood welcoming and friendly. And let me express my thanks to everyone who helped make it so special.

Todah Rabbah.

I called my father yesterday to ask him how Yom Kippur went in his synagogue. While each year, I want to know how things went in his pulpit, this year it was a more significant question since I knew that this was the last service that was being held for his synagogue.

Founded almost a century ago in 1918 as the Ridgefield Park Hebrew Association, Congregation Kanfei Shahar is closing down. It was the first Conservative synagogue in Bergen Country, NJ. And after it was on its last legs in 1981 and my father was able to revitalize for 31 years, it is now closing.

And Yom Kippur was the last service. My father told me that it was hard for him to finish his sermon as he reflected on the congregation's life and on his 45 years in the rabbinate.

We are fortunate that he will join us in just over a week for *Shmini Atzeret*, which this year falls on Columbus Day, which is Monday, October 8. He will deliver the Mr. sermon titled "A Rabbi's Judaism: Reflections on 45 Years." I hope you'll join us that morning. To make it easier to attend that Monday, we will make sure all the schools are closed - giving you the day off!

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As Daniel introduced his thoughtful *d'var Torah*, this week we read the final Torah portion that we read on a Shabbat morning: *Parashat Ha'azinu*. We read of Moses his last words to the people of Israel before he dies on the top of Mount Nebo across the Jordan River, never quite reaching the land of Israel.

Moses is been giving speech after speech at the end of his life in the book of Deuteronomy is filled with words and words, but now there is a shift. Now Moses sings to the people; his words are a poem. This Torah portion is written in a simple poetic style, in two columns. When the Torah was lifted, perhaps you saw the unique structure.

It's interesting to note that Moses' career begins with a poem: the Song of the Sea – *Shirat Hayam*, which is also written in a unique manner: the words are arranged in the Torah scroll in a pattern that looks like a brick wall.

Moses' career as the teacher of the Jewish people begins and ends with a poem. And what does he say in his closing poetry?

He reflects; he is thankful and he delivers a strong warning.

What do you think Moses feeling at this moment?

What does one feel at the end of a career?

What is one feel at the end of one's life?

Sadness. Loss. Pride. Dissappointment.

There is clearly a lot of emotion.

On the one hand, Moses can feel very good and proud of all he has accomplished. He has brought this ragtag group slaves, this complaining mixture of rebellious people on

a forty-year journey through the wilderness and they are now at the doorstep of entering the Promised Land.

But on the other hand, Moses feels like he did not accomplish everything he wanted. Have the people truly internalized God's teachings? Or are they going to stray again as they did in the episode with the golden calf?

That don't have a great track record – they spend much of the years in the wilderness complaining...

And, personally, Moses might feel cheated: he's not being permitted to enter the land of Israel. In between the words of his poem, we can feel the sorrow – his sense of loss. He is saying to himself: do I really deserve this?

Because of all these emotions coming together, the poem contains layers and nuance. It describes God in glowing terms, but at the same time there is clear anger. The warning that Moses offers to the people is quite strong; Moses' message is informed by his own feelings.

While there are many messages in the text, two verses stand out to me: first “*Ki shem Adonai ekra, havu godel l'Eloheinu* – For the name of Adonai I proclaim, give glory to God.” (DT 32:3) Our rabbis in the Talmud interpret this as meaning that we should appreciate what we have and give thanks. Even though Moses has some ambivalent feelings, he returns to his core position – an attitude of gratitude. His years of experience have taught him of the importance of giving thanks.

As we have just spent some of the last two weeks reflecting on the past year on the high holy days, we should reflect on the past with a sense of appreciation. We have been given many gifts – we should be thankful for them.

The Talmud (*Berakhot* 45a) states that this verse teaches us that three people who eat together must invite one another to a *zimun* – a formal introduction to the grace after meals – the *birkat hamazon*. It's such a beautiful teaching: whenever of people come together and enjoy food and each other's company then they get an extra layer of thanks. Not only do they express gratitude for the food but they also add another layer of appreciation because there sat each other's company.

Take a moment and consider the things you have – give thanks to God that we have food, homes; tell your family or friends you love them. I am thankful for our wonderful shul!

There is one other verse that stands out in this poem. “*Z'khor y'mot olam, binu shnot dor vador* – remember the days of old; consider the years of past generations.” (32:7) Remember the past, understanding each generation. Moses offers us a gem here. His years have given him a multitude of experiences and with those experiences, deep understandings.

Each year we come together on the holidays to remember, to reflect, to understand. And it is out of that remembering that we can learn, that we can grow, that we can change.

Judaism is very big on the notion of memory. We're supposed to remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. We're supposed to remember what the Amalekites did to us so that it never occurs again. In fact, the root of the word “remember” – *zayin khaf reish* – appears 169 times in the Torah.

We are people steeped in memory. After the Holocaust, *zakhor* - remember is the key command. We remember the victims and the overall tragedy and that inspires us to make sure it never happens again.

But the best way to remember something is to engage in a ritual. Imbedding ideas in physical action commits them to memory. Think of the Friday night *kiddush* that we recited last evening. The text states: *zekher litziyat mitzrayim* - in the remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt. When we lift up the cup of wine and sanctify time, the Shabbat, we do so remembering that we were given this gift by God who took us out of slavery.

The Shabbat becomes more powerful because of the *kiddush* and its text that reminds us to remember the birth of our people and that makes us grateful.

The great Hasidic rabbi and teacher, Nahman of Bratzlav said: “In remembering is the secret of redemption – *B’Zkhirah Sod Geulah*.”

An amazing phrase.

The way we build a better future imagined world is not by looking simply forward, but by looking backwards. Now, at first, this might not make much sense. After all, we are told to always look forward: to look for the next advance, to look to the future. We want the next iPhone, the next iPod the next iPad, the next iTV – they haven’t made that yet?!?!?

But our tradition says the opposite. The way you build tomorrow is by understanding yesterday. Don't waste the insights of the past.

As Jews, we are incredibly blessed that we have a 4000-year-old tradition containing insights about how to live our lives, how to live with purpose and meaning, how to become the best people we want to be.

We shouldn't squander that. If we, as the Torah states, appreciate the insights of *dor lador* - of generation to generation, then we can redeem the world.

Rabbi Nahman teaches us that redemption comes first from memory. And building on those insights and understandings we can act in way to make tomorrow better.

In fact, both of these verses relate to each other. Remembering the past brings us a profound sense of gratitude and appreciation. And, in turn being thankful turns our minds to the past. Gratefulness and remembering go hand-in-hand.

And that brings me to where we are right now. We find ourselves in the four days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur on the one side and Sukkot on the other. Not a lot of time to build your *sukkah* - especially when it's raining!

These are four strange days – we have left the high of the end of Yom Kippur with its loud *tekiah gedolah* and its climactic *Neilah*, closing service and we have not yet arrived in our temporary dwelling huts of Sukkot.

God is sending us off into the new year, with blessings and support. While Rosh Hashanah is called *Yom Hazikaron* – the days of Remembrance, and Yom Kippur – *Yom Hadin* – a day of Judgement – Sukkot is the time of our joy – *zman simhateinu* – we leave the past of remembering on the high holy days and we turn to the present – to the joy of the moment.

But then we listen to this *parashah*, to Moshe’s words and we are reminded – we should always find the right balance – even as we appreciate the joy in a moment, we should not forget the past.

Think of a Jewish wedding. We break the glass remembering the destruction of Jerusalem – the broken world and our broken past, even in a moment of great joy.

Whether we learn this from my dad reflecting on his decades of teaching or Moshe sharing with the people or each of us looking back on our year and our lives, we are a people who strive to live in more than one time.

While we want to be fully present in this moment, we come at with a deep awareness and appreciation of the past. And that will help us create a redeemed future.

May we always remember that *b'zchirah sod geulah* - remembering is the secret of redemption.

Shabbat Shalom.