Three Tendencies: Thoughts for Parashat Ha'azinu

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Ha'azinu

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In his essay, “The Messianic Idea in Judaism,” Professor Gershom Scholem points to three tendencies within the spiritual life of the Jewish people.

The “conservative” element stresses the need to maintain things as they’ve always been. It is manifested in a deep commitment to Jewish law and custom; it focuses on detail and ritual. This tendency wants to ensure stability and continuity. It worries that any change in the system can lead to the unraveling of the entire structure.

The “restorative” element longs for the “good old days.” It wants to renew our days as of old, to reestablish the kingdom of King David, to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. Its underlying thought is that the greatest eras and personalities are in the past, and that our wish is to return to a past “Golden Age.”

The “utopian” element longs for a messianic era. It is characterized by spiritual restlessness and idealistic fervor. It contains within it bubbling emotions, and can be creative, nerve-wracking, even painful. It calls on us to change our focus from the safety of the past to the uncertainty of the future.

Throughout Jewish history, these three elements have reflected themselves in our religious lives. In some eras, one element has predominated; in other eras, another element has predominated. But all three have always been with us to some degree.

The challenge is to balance the claims of all three tendencies, and to develop a Jewish life that draws on the strengths of each. The “conservative” element maintains the religious structure of our daily lives. Without adherence to halakha

on a regular basis, Judaism is sapped of its influence on our lives. It becomes a nostalgic pastime to be experienced on special occasions. It becomes a matter of personal preference rather than a commitment to a divinely ordained way of life. Without the “conservative” element, Judaism becomes watered down to such a degree as to lose its real spiritual power.

The “restorative” element reminds us that we indeed did enjoy “golden ages” and we did indeed produce great personalities. While we in fact do not want to return to the past, yet we can derive tremendous inspiration from the great events and personalities of Jewish history. If we can restore the best elements of our past, this can be a boon to us and to the future of our people.

The “utopian” element reminds us to focus on the future. Without the idealism and hopefulness of utopianism, we risk becoming mired in the past. This tendency keeps us focused on developing new ideas, new ways of approaching an imperfect world, new aspirations for improving society.

In this week’s Torah portion, we read: “Remember the days of old; think about the years of the past generations. Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders and they will explain to you.” (Devarim 32:7). I believe this verse can be understood as providing us insight on maintaining a vibrant Judaism that maintains a keen balance among the conservative, restorative and utopian tendencies. “Remember the days of old…” Tradition is vital to our wellbeing. By rooting ourselves in our traditions and teachings, we retain continuity with our past and we deepen our sense of rootedness and structure. This is the conservative tendency.

“Ask your father…” Rashi comments that “father” refers to our prophets. This is a nod to the restorative element. We lack prophecy today; yet we long for the “good old days” when we had divinely inspired prophets who could lead us, who could deliver direct messages from God. Lacking the presence of living prophets, we must depend on the words of the prophets as recorded in the Bible.

“Your elders…” Rashi comments that “elders” refers to our sages. The hallmark of a genuine sage is wisdom to apply ancient teachings to the needs of the current generation. Historically, our greatest sages have also been the most utopian i.e. the most tuned in to the coming generations of the Jewish people, the most concerned about a messianic future.

Judaism that is based primarily on the “conservative” tendency becomes dry and over-ritualized. Judaism that is based primarily on the “restorative” element

becomes quixotic and irrelevant. Judaism that is based primarily on the “utopian” element becomes deracinated, flailing out in various directions while disconnecting itself from the wellsprings of Jewish tradition.

In truth, we need all three elements and we need to balance them wisely. This was true of the Jewish past. It is true for the Jewish present. It is the foundation of the Jewish future.

Angel for Shabbat