

Thoughts on Parashat Haazinu

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Angel for Shabbat

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by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The Haazinu poem is Moses' admonition to the people of Israel, recited to them shortly before his death. In the second verse, he uses the imagery of rain to symbolize his hope that his teachings will sink into the people and be beneficial to them.

Rabbi Haim David Halevy, late Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Tel-Aviv, commented on the significance of rain in religious imagery. Rain is vital for the growth of crops and vegetation. Yet, for the rain to be most effective, it is necessary for the soil first to be cultivated and that seeds be planted. In such a field, the rain leads to abundant produce. When rain falls on fallow, uncultivated fields, it does not result in optimal results. Likewise, wrote Rabbi Halevy, with "spiritual rain". Those who are most receptive and spiritually cultivated derive far more benefit from Torah than those who remain "fallow". For us to derive maximum spiritual satisfaction, we need to study Torah, observe the mitzvot, and thereby attain higher levels of spirituality. If we don't prepare ourselves to receive the spirit of Torah, its "rain" may produce weeds and thistles. Nonetheless, the power of Torah is such that it can provide blessing even to the uncultivated.

The 19th century Hassidic Rebbe Simcha Bunim observed that the holy words of Torah are compared to rain. The effects of rain may not be immediately evident since it may take weeks for the crops and vegetation to grow. Likewise, the words of Torah may not seem to make an immediate impact on the listener. Yet, like rain, it seeps in and does its beneficial work. Even if it seems that the words of

Torah have little or no influence, yet in the course of time these words sink in and help one attain greater spiritual insight and happiness.

On Shemini Hag Atsereth, which we will be observing very soon, we have a special prayer for rain, asking God to grant blessed rainfall so that there will be abundance and prosperity in our world. Just as we pray for the physical rain to sustain our physical lives, so we should keep in mind to pray for the "spiritual rain" that will sustain our spiritual lives.

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by Max Nussbaum

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The third Pasuk of Ha'azinu states "When I call out the name of the Lord, ascribe greatness to our God." In Masekhet Berakhot, on Daf 21a, this Pasuk is brought as a source for Birkat HaTorah, the blessing we say everyday shortly after we wake up, before we learn Torah. The Gemara lists Birkat HaTorah as one of the two blessings that are obligatory by Torah law; the other one is Birkat HaMazon. (The other blessings are obligatory by rabbinic law.)

We know that Birkat HaTorah is said before we actually learn, but with Birkat HaMazon, the blessing is said after we eat. Why aren't they both said before or both said after-- shouldn't they be the same?

Before we eat, we are overwhelmed with gratitude to Hashem because we are hungry and want to eat. It's obvious that we should ask permission and thank Hashem before we eat. After eating, it's more likely that we forget to thank Hashem for the food we just had. That's why we say Birkat HaMazon after we eat. Birkat HaTorah is the opposite; it's very easy to thank Hashem after we learn because it is such an enjoyable experience. It's very hard to get the motivation to start learning, that's why we say the blessing before. It's supposed to get us excited to start learning.

There is an important comparison to be made between these two blessings. Torah and food are both a major part of daily life and they share the same result in

that they both satisfy us. Food satisfies us physically, and Torah satisfies us spiritually. We can't have too much of one without the other or else we wouldn't be able to function properly. If we learn too much without eating, we will lose strength. If we eat too much without learning, we might forget that everything comes from Hashem.

Both of these berakhot are important, recognizing that we are grateful to Hashem for the physical and spiritual blessings with which He endows us.