

## Ha'azinu: The Theology of Moses and the Theatrics of the Sukkah

The autumn holiday season in the Jewish calendar begins on the 1st of Tishrei with Rosh Hashanah and continues through Simchat Torah on the 23rd of Tishrei, including the ten Days of Awe and the eight days of Sukkot. However, for four days during this period, the days between Yom Kippur and the start of Sukkot, we have a brief break from the holidays in order to finish building a sukkah. (This year, on account of today's Shabbat being one of those four days, we have only three days for building!)

Our Torah reading for this Shabbat is Ha'azinu (“Give ear!”), which consists mostly of “The Song of Moses.” This poem is probably quite ancient, dating from before the establishment of the monarchy. The Hebrew is vivid and earthy (this is hard to convey in an English translation) and contains many obscure archaic words. The theology of the poem is also archaic. Consider, for example, verse 8, which, in Alter's translation is rendered as follows:

*When Elyon gave estates to nations, when He split up the sons of man,  
He set out the boundaries of peoples, by the number of the sundry gods.*

This presents the Mesopotamian idea that each nation has a corresponding god looking after its interests. The success or failure of nation states is determined at least in part by the conflicts and political maneuvering of the gods. One of the gods serves as chairman of the divine council. Which god is chairman depended largely on which nation was telling the story! In our story, Moses is claiming that the God of Israel, referred to here as *Elyon*, is the chief god who set up the “one god, one nation” arrangement.

It is interesting, though, that the text of verse 8 that we just heard chanted a little while ago is not the text Alter is translating. In synagogues today we use the Masoretic text of the Torah, which dates from the 7th century CE. Early versions, found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, have the phrase **מספר בני אלוהים** (“the number of the sundry gods”), while the Masoretic text substitutes the phrase **מספר בני ישראל** (“the number of the people of Israel”). Evidently, the Masoretic editors were uncomfortable with the polytheistic Mesopotamian theology.

Today's haftarah is the Song of David. The Hebrew here is elegant and florid, in the style of the Psalms. (In fact, this is a Psalm, included as number 18 in the Book of Psalms, in addition to here in the Second Book of Samuel.)

*In my distress I called on the Lord, cried out to my God; in His temple He heard my voice; my cry to Him reached his ears....*

*He brought me out to freedom; He rescued me because He was pleased with me.*

*The Lord rewarded me according to my merit; He requited the cleanness of my hands;*

*For I have kept to the ways of the Lord, and have not been guilty before my God;*

*For I am mindful of all His rules; I have not disregarded His laws.*

The most obvious theological difference from the Song of Moses is that now God is seen as having a personal relationship with King David, not just with the nation as a whole. This theology is more modern but it is still problematic. It is an empirical fact that people who follow the rules are not always protected. Furthermore, we know from earlier passages in the Second Book of Samuel that King David was certainly not blameless!

Jewish theology has always been syncretic. (*Syncretism*: The combination of different forms of belief or practice.) Moses took Mesopotamian ideas but replaced the chief god Marduk (the god of the capitol city of the Babylonian Empire) with the God of Israel. King David seems to have accepted the one nation, one god doctrine (later in II Samuel his army chief, probably a foreign mercenary, refers to “your God”), but he personalized the relationship. God protects Israel by protecting the King of Israel and He takes into account the character of the king when deciding the future of the nation.

It was much later, during the many centuries that Israel was under the rule of the Persian Empire, that we adopted the idea of a universal God. The Persians believed in the existence of only two gods, who were coequal and universal: a God of Good and a God of Evil. It is the choice of individual humans which God to serve. The Jewish people rejected the idea of a God of Evil, but accepted the idea of a universal God, a God of all nations and peoples. They kept the Mesopotamian idea of a Divine Council but demoted all the lesser gods to the status of messengers (the literal meaning of the word “angel”) whose duties were to deliver messages and perform errands for the Chairman who was now declared to be the one and only universal God.

In the 20th century, Mordecai Kaplan syncretized Judaism with the scientific world view, replacing supernaturalism with naturalism. He expressed traditional Jewish concepts in terms of scientific vocabulary. God is a *force field* that creates a tendency toward good behavior. Religious civilizations evolve according to a Darwinian *evolutionary* process. Thus, in time honored fashion, he attempted to incorporate insights of the predominant “theology” of the culture in which we were living (scientific naturalism) into Judaism.

For all this talk of theologies, the fact is that theology plays a relatively minor role in Judaism. We tend to focus more on the performance of ceremonies and rituals, on the telling of stories, and on the development of norms for ethical behavior, than we do on philosophical speculations. There is another event this week, in addition to our public reading of the Songs of Moses and David, that for me gives more profound insight into the nature of human existence than do any of these theologies. This is the period in which we build a sukkah. Until last year I made the excuse that I couldn't build a sukkah because I was just a renter. Last year I became a homeowner for the first time. I decided, with some trepidation, to build a sukkah. (My previous training in construction work consisted of a required junior high school course in word working in which I earned a C-, thanks to the generosity of the teacher.) I ordered a kit from the online vendor *sukkot.com*. I received in the mail a box containing bags of screws of various sizes, numerous braces of various shapes, and an instruction booklet with specifications for lumber, which I had delivered a few days later. For every two screws I drilled into place, it seemed I had to remove one other because I had misread the instructions. The lumber was heavy and it took all my strength to raise it into position and then keep it from falling down. At one point my backyard neighbor Joanne, who had been watching with concern, offered the services of her teenage sons to help, but I assured her, with feigned confidence, that it was all under control.

Finally it was finished, with just a few minutes to spare before sundown and the start of the festival. I thought to myself, “sukkah building is hard work,” as I sat sweating and exhausted in my new temporary dwelling. I looked up at the stars through my sukkah's useless ceiling. I smelled the scent of dog feces that wafted over the fence from my next-door neighbors' yard through my sukkah's useless walls. The wind started to blow and the whole structure threatened to fall over. Then it started to rain and the sukkah could not keep me dry, so I retreated into my regular home.

Sukkah building is a lot of work and the result is something useless, temporary, and precarious. One could say the same thing for human existence. Yet we build a sukkah as part of *זמן שמחתינו*, the

happiest time in the Jewish calendar, seven days of celebrating. Later, an eighth day was added for even more raucous celebration. In Eastern Europe, the celebrating continued throughout the following week! We acknowledge the precariousness of our existence, as individuals and as a civilization, yet we nevertheless celebrate. I suggest that the theatrics of Sukkot provide an insight into our lives that is more profound than anything we get from the theologies of Moses, David, or Kaplan—theatricality is more important to Judaism than is theology.

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*September, 2012*