

Shabbat Ha'azinu 5787
September 18, 2026
First Day of Yachad
No B'nei Mitzvah

I'm pretty sure that 100% of rabbis relate to how Moses is feeling in this week's parasha. Not to compare my colleagues or me to Moshe Rabbeinu— I'havdil, on the contrary, every one of us small-scale leaders who has ever tried to use words to influence people can relate to how he's feeling. I, for one, gave a sermon on Rosh Hashanah that I really believe in, and I think the stakes are high, and I'm desperately trying to figure out how to get it as far out there as I can, hoping against hope that our people might hear me.

Commentators criticize and struggle with what Moses has to say in his final speech/poem/song to the Israelites. It includes harsh rebuke. But I think we ought to empathize and learn from the emotions that are exuding from this text.

First of all, we have to remember that Moses never even wanted this role. At the burning bush in Exodus 3, Moses demurs or rejects G-d's call five times – first saying “Mi anochi../who am I?” to take on this role. Then saying, “When the people ask me who sent you, what am I supposed to say?” Then saying, “But what if they don't believe me and don't listen?” And then saying, “Please, G-d, I've never been a man of words... I'm slow of speech and slow of tongue.” And finally saying, “Please, Adonai, send someone else.” None of it worked.

And here we are, a lifetime later, as Moses prepares to die on Mount Nebo, looking over but never entering the Promised Land he's been aiming for his whole life. Here we are, after a lifetime of trying to get these people to listen to him. The book of Deuteronomy, which is one big speech by Moses, includes the word Shema 92 times, including of course the famous one. He's a broken record. What he's trying to get them to listen to is G-d's own voice and message. They say they're listening, but then they ignore what they heard. They rebel, they refuse, they defy, they forget, and often they don't seem to be listening at all.

Now he's going to die, and they're going to enter the Promised Land without him, and this is his last chance to try to get them to hear him. Not because he wants to feel important. Not because he wants to win an argument. But because he's seen a vision that once they're settled in the land and have plenty to eat and a sense of security, they are going to ignore everything he's taught them all of these years. They're going to behave in ways that threaten their peace and prosperity. They're going to ignore the prophets who live in their generation, and they're going to persist in self-destructive behavior until they are dispossessed of their land, until they are starving and wandering the world. He sees that this is going to happen, and he is pleading with them to listen, to pay attention.

So if he sounds like he's shouting, he probably is. And if he sounds like he's begging, he probably is. And if he sounds frustrated and sad, angry and wistful, he is probably all of those things.

The question is how can a leader get people to change when what they have is words? When they see that their people are doing the wrong thing, going in the wrong direction, endangering themselves and each other through their actions, how can a leader break through?

Moses starts out with the word Ha'Azinu, different from the word Shema. It means "give me your ear." The root of the word is ear, *ozen*. He asks for not just the Israelites but all of existence to hear him.

הָאֲזִינוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶדְבָּרָה
וְתִשְׁמַע הָאָרֶץ אִמְרֵי־כִי:

Give ear, O heavens, let me speak;
Let the earth hear the words I utter!
May my discourse come down as the rain,
My speech distill as the dew,
Like showers on young growth,
Like droplets on the grass.

Rashi says that Moses is trying to give his words staying power by calling upon the specific entities of heaven and earth to stand as witnesses, something he's done before. Quoting Sifrei Devarim (306:15), Rashi says, "Moses thought: 'I am a being of flesh and blood (mortal); tomorrow I shall be dead. If the Israelites will say, 'We never accepted the covenant', who can come and refute them?' Therefore he called heaven and earth as witnesses against them — witnesses that endure forever. And a further reason," Rashi continues, "was that if [the Israelites] should act worthily, the witnesses might come and give them their reward: the vine might yield its fruit, the ground give its increase, the heaven bestow its dew; while if they should act sinfully, the hand of the witnesses might be first against them" — in other words, if they do wrong, the rain and the dew would not fall, the earth would not yield produce — they would face drought and famine.

So one approach for a leader to break through with their words is the promise and threat of reward and punishment. This is not a new tactic for Moses, and can be seen as an attempt to give his fleeting words not just staying power, but bite.

Taking a different approach, Rabbi Mike Moskowitz quotes the classic Hasidic commentary Ahavat Shalom by Menachem Mendl of Kosov, a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov. The Ahavat Shalom says that Moses starts by asking heaven to listen before he begins speaking, because he's trying to indicate to the people that they should listen first, before they speak or act. The Ahavat Shalom then uses gematria to find that the word *ozen*, ear, and the word *chen*, grace, both add up to 58, which is also the value of the spelled out letters *Yod- Hey- Vav- Hey*, G-d's name. From this, the Ahavat Shalom concludes that it is through the grace of heaven that we are heard. Through our quality of grace, and through G-d's grace. This is a different approach,

suggesting as the Talmud does, that *tokhekha*, attempts to correct the behavior of others through words, is best received when given gently, carefully, softly, without anger or shame, but with *chen*, with grace.

In the end, in the last parasha of the Torah, Moses dies. We could say that his effort in Ha'Azinu, this parasha, doesn't work, because we know that the people enter the land and do stray from his teaching and do stray from G-d's way. In time, they are expelled from the land. But on the other hand, you could say that Moses's efforts in this poem do work, because we're still reading them and talking about them and hearing them sung.

This is Shabbat Shuva, when not only Moses, but also the prophet Hosea, are trying desperately to speak not only to the people of their time but to us. Trying to get us to listen, to pay attention, to give our ears, to hear what it is that we most need to hear. To return to our hearts, to our souls, to G-d G-dself, to turn and change and abandon what is wrong and adopt what is right, and live the very best lives we can live.

It may not be possible for any leader or prophet to break through to us, to make us hear G-d's voice, stubborn as we all are, and I sometimes wonder if we see G-d's evolution of tactics by the time we get to the Prophet Elijah, who in First Kings 19:11-13 has this experience: "There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks by the power of Adonai; but God was not in the wind. After the wind--an earthquake; but God was not in the earthquake. ¹² After the earthquake--fire; but God was not in the fire. And after the fire--**a kol demama daka, a still small voice.** ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his mantle about his face and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then **a voice** addressed him: "**Why are you here, Elijah?**"

Perhaps, when the people wouldn't listen to Moses, after all of his development from the man at the burning bush who doubted himself to the man at the end of his life who demanded an audience. Perhaps, after he led his people out of Egypt, across the sea, through the wilderness, gave them 613 mitzvot and taught them Torah, and they still couldn't hear the voice of G-d through him, perhaps it was time to put that voice inside of them, inside of us, inside our very heartbeat, vibrating through our very souls, in the sound of our own voice, whispering patiently, gently, persistently, so that we will hear.

Shabbat Shalom, G'mar Chatima Tova.