

There is no good time for a great leader to pass from the scene. In times of national distress, a leader can either remain vibrant until the nation gets through that distress, or die with their goals unmet. I think of President Roosevelt in the waning days of the Second World War, weakened by disease and age yet trying to shape the post-war world in his dealings with Stalin and Churchill at Yalta. At the same time, Roosevelt and his aides had to choose a running mate for the 1944 election, and they knew that whoever it was would likely assume the presidency after Roosevelt's death. Those two concerns, the war and its aftermath and America's future leadership, were very much on the president's mind from the summer of 1944 through his death in April 1945. In his case, the outcome of the war was not in doubt, yet he would not live to see its end. Reelection was not too tall an order; he had already been elected president three times, and the seriousness of his condition was not known to the public. The question before us is that of ensuring a legacy. Knowing that time is running out, what do *make sure* will happen, and what do we *say* about what will happen? After we are gone, there is no guarantee; all bets are off, so if we want to shape the future, our deed and words had better be pretty strong.

Concern for legacy seems to be driving much of what we read in Ha'azinu, and not only Moses' legacy, but God's as well. Based on what Moses says in this poetic section of his final address to the people, the two of them have cause for concern. Up until this point, Moses has been, in a phrase often applied to the first American president, 'the indispensable man.' It was God's power that freed the people from bondage, sustained them in the wilderness for forty years, and brought them to Canaan's doorstep, but it was Moses who led the way. Moses has served as God's representative and partner in all of these endeavors, and now it is time for Moses

to die. He knows this because God has told him what will happen. Moses will speak to the people, then ascend Mt. Nebo, looking over the Holy Land, and then die there without entering it. What will become of this people when he is gone?

What Moses says in the parsha is that the gifts that God has provided – land, progeny, and material wealth – will cause the people to become lazy and ungrateful, that they will turn to other gods, that they will as a result suffer terrible defeat at their enemies' hands. The evil irony that Moses foresees is that the success which God provides will be the thing that distances people from God. The speech is a prophecy and, as such, constitutes a warning. 'I know you well,' Moses is saying, 'Better than you know yourselves. I know that when I am gone that all of your worst tendencies will emerge. But know well that God will punish you, through the agency of your enemies, who will rout you in battle. Yet they will not completely destroy you, lest they get the idea that it was anything but God's will that they defeated you.' It's not the kind of speech we would imagine Roosevelt giving.

As a prophet, Moses is the instrument of communication between God and the people. But we know from many other instances in the Torah that Moses does not always quote God exactly, and we also know that if we compare God's direct commands to Moses to the description of how Moses carries out those commands, there are often discrepancies. Prophecy is an imperfect institution, and at least some of what a prophet says is not the literal word of God but the prophet's paraphrase of those words. In this case, I want to suggest that some of Moses' final words here are, even more than in other cases, reflect his own anxieties about the people's future, as well as God's. The unusually harsh tone reveals just how deeply Moses and God have been disappointed by the people's behavior in the past and how little faith they seem to have in

the Israelites' ability to rise above past mistakes. Is this an honest assessment of likely outcomes, or the refusal to believe that they can engage in teshuvah?

We are in the midst of days when we ask ourselves the same question. Moses' words here are certainly harsh, but given what he and they have been through, they are true enough, if a bit hyperbolic, to sting. That is not necessarily a bad thing at this time of year. If we can speak to ourselves during the Yamim Nora'im the way Moses speaks to the people in the parsha, perhaps we can succeed in the task of teshuvah. If a bit of overstating the case against ourselves helps us to remove the stumbling block of our own denials, then it is worth it. Having then cleansed ourselves through honest, even if harsh, self-reflection, we can move forward into a year of good relationships.

Shabbat shalom; shanah tovah tikhateimu; may you be sealed in the Book of Life