

DEBAR TORAH by RABBI ROHDE

The Severe but Rewarding Terms of God's Disciplinary Pact

The Haazinu Song at the end of Deuteronomy constitutes the legal text of a treaty. Its strict poetic structure is the result of its configuration as a particularly formal document. As the Torah says in the introduction to the Song at the end of the last chapter as well as in the appendix to the Song in 32:45-46, the Song itself is to bear "witness" to the pact between God and Israel; that is to say, it is to serve as the witnessing documentation of the treaty. This treaty is a formal pact between YHVH, Israel's Sovereign God, Monarch, and Lord, and the Nation Israel who pledges to be bound by exclusive subservience and allegiance to His sole Suzerainty as Sovereign Monarch, Lord, and God.

The contrasting Blessings and Curses in the Song are part of this treaty structure: They constitute terms of a formal Oath of Fealty, a legal, binding promise and commitment. It grants favor and reward in consequence of keeping the Pact, as well as calling for the direst penalties and invoking calamity and curse for its violation. This is why the Song is introduced by a "calling to witness" of Heaven and Earth as well as reference to the "Name of the Lord:" to show that this is a witnessing document, testimony sworn by an oath invoking God's Name. A passage at the end of the Song also uses terminology of oath-taking to finish the treaty: Verse 32:40-41 has God "raising His Hand to Heaven [and swearing]" "for Eternity by My [very] Life" that I will whet My flashing sword-blade, take retribution in hand, requite Vengeance upon My foes [who are presumably Israel's foes, as well] and shall recompense those who revile Me."

The Parashah ends with the command for Moses to ascend Mount Nebo to die, with the last verse reminding Moses that he may only view the Land from the opposite bank but is prohibited from entering himself. Yet in the narrative, Moses' death does not immediately follow; rather, first there is appended the further Song of Blessing of VeZot HaBerakha, and only afterwards does Moses die. The VeZot HaBerakha song seems to be a kind of "deathbed blessing" of Moses, notwithstanding the fact that with Moses there was no actual deathbed. The Blessing's tribal structure is very much parallel to the deathbed blessing of Jacob at the end of Genesis. Jacob, of course, dies on an actual sickbed surrounded by his sons. Moses, however, never was sick (the Torah says that "Moses' moisture never fled him" – that he died in full health) and hence had no "deathbed" at all, dying instead utterly alone on top of a mountain – indeed, God Himself seemingly undertook Moses' burial. Notwithstanding the lack of a bed, God's command informs Moses that he is to die, and hence must commence his "goodbye" blessing. But why start to relate the death of Moses only to interrupt it and return to it later?

One reason for prematurely mentioning Moses' being commanded to die is that the severity of God's penalty of death decreed upon Moses is to serve as an example of how God will strictly prosecute the Haazinu pact among the leadership of Israel. The message here is that no leader, not even Moses, can be excepted from the terms of retribution for even the most minor infractions. The fact that Moses is so painfully reminded of his relatively minor faithlessness sets the bar for leaders' absolute loyalty and faith extremely high. It signals any and all future leaders of Israel that they will be kept to the terms of the Pact in the strictest terms.

The flip side to the Pact's severest terms of retribution and curse for the violation of this Sworn Pact of Fealty are the great blessings and rewards vouchsafed by God for the Pact's observance. Beyond particular rewards, Israel is eternally vouchsafed God's primary loyalty, prior to anyone else. This accounts for the mystifying passage in Verse 8: "When the Most High gave nations their inheritances, and set the divisions of man, He fixed the boundaries of peoples [in relation to] the number of the Children of Israel." Israel has God's priority, even in time, so to speak. Of all the Universe over which YHVH reigns, Israel has the most prior claim for its Sovereign God's succor and support. By faithfully and exclusively submitting themselves to the severe discipline of this Pact, which binds them abide by the laws of the entire Torah (this Pact was previously referred to as "this Torah"), Israel is vouchsafed God's first and eternally everlasting commitment. Just as Israel binds itself to be loyal to the exclusive suzerainty of God, so God binds Himself to a prior and exclusive loyalty to the Israel which swears fealty to Him Alone.

But in return for this Divine priority and favor, Israel must accept subservience and fealty to every detail of their Divine Sovereign's Laws and Decrees, and face the severest penalties for infractions. The Pact of the Torah is above all a system of strict and formal law and discipline by which Israel and indeed the entire World is kept in Order. Without such strict discipline, Calamity and, indeed, Chaos will be unleashed and ensue. This is the deeper meaning of God's having "set the boundaries of nations according to the number of the Children of Israel:" Only the boundaries and discipline set for Israel by God in the Torah keep the Land and World from returning to Chaos. As we finish this year's reading of the Torah and return to the Creation narrative at its beginning, we are to take the lesson that the Order through which God made our World is fragile, and Calamity and Destruction may regularly be visited upon us. Only by utterly subjecting ourselves to the system of severe discipline and reprimand by which the Torah's Laws bind us can our World be kept in Order and avoid reverting to the Chaos of its beginning.



CONGREGATION SHEARITH ISRAEL The Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue

Shabbat Teshuba 5784

September 22-23, 2023 | 8 Tishrei 5784

SCHEDULE

Kaplan: p. 1024 | Haftarah: p. 1246

Hertz: p. 896 | Haftarah: p. 891

Candle Lighting | 6:36 pm

Friday Evening Services | 6:30 pm | Main Sanctuary

Zemirot | 8:15 am | Main Sanctuary

Shahrit | 9:00 am | Main Sanctuary

Shabbat Teshuba Derasha | At Morning Services | Rabbi Soloveichik
"Patton's Prayer, an Israeli Pop Hit, and the Journey of Repentance"
See inside for sponsor listings.

Tot Shabbat | 10:00 am | Fidanque Youth Room | Led by Liz Rios

Junior Congregation | 10:30 am | Small Synagogue

Kiddush | following the derasha | Paved Paradise | *Kiddush Sponsor: Rachel Neumark Herlands & Jonathan Herlands, in loving memory of Barbara Herlands Smith | Kiddush Supporter: Laury Frieber, in honor of Reuben and Matea Frieber*

No Shabbat Afternoon Class this week.

Evening Services | 6:30 pm

Habdala | 7:26 pm

SHABBAT TESHUBA DERASHA SPONSORS

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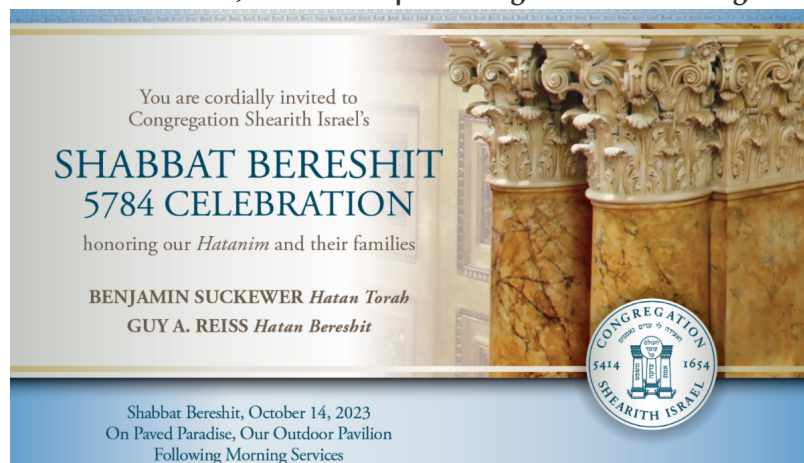
Rachel Neumark Herlands & Jonathan Herlands, *in memory of their beloved sister, Barbara Herlands Smith*

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Warren Stern, *in memory of Irene & Donald Stern*

5784 Hatanim Celebration

Luncheon on Shabbat, October 14 | following Shabbat Morning Services



For registration and sponsorship opportunities, go to shearithisrael.org/batanim2023.

COMING UP

EVE OF KIPPUR – Sunday, September 24

Preparations: Morning Selihot: 7:15 am | Shahrit: 8:05 am

Early Afternoon Mincha: 1:30 pm

Candle Lighting: before 6:32 pm | Fast Begins: 6:50 pm

Kal Nidre: Main Sanctuary & Outdoors | 6:15 pm

KIPPUR DAY – Monday, September 25

Zemirot | Sanctuary: 8:30 am

Shahrit | Sanctuary & Outdoors: 9:30 am

Mincha | Sanctuary: 3:30 pm | Outdoors: 4:45 pm

Rabbi's Sermon & Neilah | Sanctuary: 6:10 pm | Outdoor Neilah: 6:15 pm

Shofar, Arbit, & Habdala | 7:21 pm

Full schedule is available on shearithisrael.org and in the Kippur handout.

Sisterhood Succah Decoration

Wednesday & Thursday, September 27-28 | 5:00-8:00 pm

Friday, September 29 | 8:00 am-12:00 pm

To participate, sign up at shearithisrael.org/events/succah-decoration5784

Youth Succah Decoration (with Pizza!)

Wednesday, September 27 | 5:00-6:30 pm | Paved Paradise Succah

RSVP to rosenberg@shearithisrael.org

Safrut in the Succah for CSI Youth with Baruch-Lev

Hol HaMoed, Monday, Oct 2 | 5:00 pm | with Baruch-Lev, Rabbinic Intern

Sign your kids up at shearithisrael.org/events/youth-safrut

Young Professionals Hol HaMoed Mixology Mixer

Hol HaMoed, Tuesday, Oct 3 | 7:30 pm | Elias Room Succah

Register at shearithisrael.org/events/yp-succot-mixer

A Future of Health: Sephardic Genetic Medical Discoveries

with Dr. Obad Birk of Soroka Medical Center

Hol HaMoed, Oct 4 | 7 pm | followed by reception in Elias Room Succah

RSVP required at shearithisrael.org/events/soroka

COMMUNITY ANNOUNCEMENTS

Mazal tob to **Isaac Freilich**, upon becoming a Bar Mitzvah. Congratulations to his mother **Helen Rand Freilich** (& Jimmy Haber), to his siblings, **Alexander** and **Lilly**, as well as to his grandmother, **Estelle Freilich**. Isaac is the son of our late Tokea', Elliot Freilich, and grandson of our late Parnas, Dr. Dennis Freilich. Mazal tob to the entire Freilich family.