

## Ha'azinu: Finding Favor in God Yael Turitz Kaplan, Class of '27

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This week's *parsha*, Ha'azinu, is the only *parsha* in the Torah that is composed almost entirely as a song. Introduced at the end of Vayelech, Ha'azinu is Moshe's swan song to the Jewish people, where he poetically thanks God for protecting them, and prophecies about future indiscretions and salvations. But when Moshe introduces the Jewish people's connection to God, he chooses a surprising starting point:

**[God] found them in a wilderness (*b'ereetz midbar*)**, in an empty howling waste. [God] surrounded them, watched over them, guarded them as the pupil of God's eye (Devarim 32:10).

Surely, God did not find Bnei Yisrael in the wilderness! Anyone who has read the 52 *parshiot* before this one would tell you that God chose the Jewish people either way back in Bereishit, with Avraham Avinu, or with the exodus from Egypt in Sefer Shemot. Sefer Bamidbar, which details Bnei Yisrael's travels in the wilderness, is already the third book of the Torah, after countless stories of God interacting with the Jewish people. Furthermore, what could Moshe possibly mean by saying that God *found* them. Is God's knowledge not omniscient? How can God *find* someone when God knows all?

The Midrash Tanchuma offers an explanation:

[It was] a great find, [when] the Holy Blessed One found Israel. [God was] like a person who, when traveling in the wilderness, finds grapes there. So did the Holy Blessed One, find Israel, as stated (in Hos. 9:10), "I found Israel like grapes in the wilderness." It is therefore stated (in Deut. 32:10), "He found him in the wilderness" (Midrash Tanchuma, Bamidbar 13:1).

To "find" something implies that something is missing, and the Midrash here suggests that before Bnei Yisrael received the Torah, the world was lacking. Upon shepherding Bnei Yisrael into the wilderness and giving them the Torah, God "found" what was missing—a light in the dark world akin to someone finding grapes in the wilderness.

The Sefat Emet takes this idea one step further, drawing from the next word in the verse:

Before Bnei Yisrael received the Torah, the world was in a state of emptiness, described as "תהו" (*tohu*), meaning void or chaos. This concept indicates that Bnei Yisrael recognized their own lack and need for something greater, making them worthy of receiving the Torah. This concept is mirrored in the creation narrative, where there was initially a state of nothingness, described as "תהו," followed by the emergence of light (Sefat Emet, Bamidbar 7:3).

For the Sefat Emet, the piece that was lacking was the acknowledgement of human inadequacy. Once Bnei Yisrael demonstrated their loyalty to God at Har Sinai, God “found” what God was “looking” for.

I’d like to suggest a third layer to Moshe’s use of the word *matza* (מצא). The word מצא, to find, is most often used throughout the Torah as part of the phrase מציא חן (*matza chen*), to find favor. “Finding favor” is a theme throughout all of Tanakh, beginning with Noach, who “found favor” in God’s eyes, and culminating with Esther, who begs for the favor of Achashverosh when pleading for her people. In fact, Esther’s phrase, *im matzati chen b’inecha*, or something almost identical to it, is found 14 times throughout Tanakh, all in the context of one character seeking a positive relationship with another (or with God). It is an interesting framing, wherein the onus lies on the person seeking the relationship.

If we apply this framing to Moshe’s words here, perhaps we can understand what he means when he says that God “found.” It is not that an omniscient being discovered something unknown, but that at Har Sinai God sought to **find favor in the eyes of Bnei Yisrael**. Connect this framing to the words in the Midrash and the Sefat Emet—that before Matan Torah there was nothing but emptiness (*tohu*)—and we can suddenly unearth a deeper meaning in Moshe’s words. God may have chosen the Jewish people way back in Bereishit, but at Har Sinai, the people chose God. By offering them the Torah, God sought to find favor with them, to create a two-sided relationship.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel calls this “God in search of man.” Throughout the Torah, Heschel argues, “it is as if God were unwilling to be alone, and He had chosen man to serve Him. Our seeking Him is not only man’s but also His concern” (*God in Search of Man*, 136). Perhaps Moshe is referring to this same idea; that the moment of Matan Torah was a moment of God seeking us, and because Bnei Yisrael answered faithfully, they were “found” to God.

We read Parshat Ha’azinu on Shabbat *Shuva*, the Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. These days are dedicated to *teshuvah* and to recommitting ourselves to our relationship with *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*. In a way, God is seeking to find us again, yearning for a relationship. Like Bnei Yisrael did in the wilderness, we must rise to this task and respond to God’s supplication with a resounding “הנני”—we are here, committed to this enduring relationship.

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