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Parshat Haazinu: The Sacred Gap

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Parshat Haazinu, Moshe's penultimate poem addressed to the people of Israel, contains both stirring images of who God is and exhortations regarding who the people ought to be. Among the metaphors of the divine offered, so many of them pertaining to God's hard power, one stands out for its softness:

10 [God] found them [lit. him] in a desert region, in an empty howling waste. He engirded them, watched over them, guarded them as a pupil of his eye. 11 As an eagle awakens its nest, hovering over its fledglings, so did He spread His wings and take them, carrying them on its pinions. (Deuteronomy 32: 10-11)

י' ימצאהו בארץ מדבר ובתהו ילל
ישמן יסבבנהו יבוננהו יצרנהו כאישון
עינו: יא כנשר יעיר קנו על גוזליו ירחף
יפרש כנפיו יקחהו ישאהו על אברתו:
(דברים לב: יא)

In the midst of the “*tohu*,” “the empty howling waste” of the desert, God secured His people like an eagle. But what is the meaning of this particular metaphor?

Rashi, quoting Sifrei 32:11, writes the following:

Hovering over its fledglings: [The eagle] does not impose its [whole] body upon them. Rather, it hovers above them, touching them and yet not quite touching them. So too, is the Holy One, Blessed is He. [As in the verse:] “We did not find the Almighty great in power” (Job 37:23). When He came to give the Torah to Israel, He did not reveal Himself to them from one direction [thus concentrating His power at one point, as it were], but rather, from four directions, as Scripture states, “The Lord came from Sinai, and shone forth from Seir to them, and appeared from Mount Paran” (Deut. 33:2). [This accounts for three directions.] The fourth direction is referred to in [the verse], “God comes from Teman” (Hab. 3:3). (Rashi, Deut. 32:11)

על גוזליו ירחף: אינו מכביד עצמו
עליהם אלא מחופף, נוגע ואינו
נוגע, אף הקב"ה (איוב לז, כג)
שדי לא מצאנוהו שגיא כח, כשבא
ליתן תורה לא נגלה עליהם מרוח
אחת אלא מארבע רוחות, שנאמר
(לקמן לג, ב) ה' מסיני בא וזרח
משעיר למו הופיע מהר פארן
ואתה מרבות קודש, (חבקוק ג,
ג) אלוה מתימן יבא זו רוח
רביעית: (רש"י דברים לב: יא)

The eagle, regal as it is, large as it is, does not bear down its weight on the nest that holds its precious babies. It hovers ever so gently above them—“*nogeah v'eino nogeah*,” “touching yet not quite touching”—awakening them to its presence without crushing them on account of it. It stays close enough to its young to protect them, but far enough away also to protect them.

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So too does God, says the *midrash*. At God's most powerful showing, at Mount Sinai, God demonstrated this dynamic of compassionate hovering. In stark contrast to the rabbinic image of the mountain held over the heads of the Israelites with a threat (see BT Avodah Zara 2b), the *midrash* imagines God fluttering lightly above them with an invitation. Come to me. Hear me. Not through loud commands from on high, but through soft whispers enveloping you down below. And know that, as an act of love, I will come close to you, but never too close.

This exquisite image of touch-that-is-not-a-touch can be found in one other place, one other "*tohu*," the "*tohu va'vohu*" of creation. The Jerusalem Talmud draws this connection:

A story of Rabbi Yehoshua [who was walking in the street and Ben Zoma came opposite him] he reached him and did not greet him. He said to him [from where and to where] Ben Zoma? He said to him: I was watching the creation, and there is not between the upper waters and the lower waters even a handbreadth. As it is written (Genesis 1:2) "and the spirit of [or wind of] God hovered over the face of the waters." And it says (Deuteronomy 32:11): "As an eagle awakens its nest," etc. Just as the eagle flies over the nest, touching and not touching, so too there is not even a handbreadth between the upper waters and lower waters. Rabbi Yehoshua said to his students: Ben Zoma is already outside. In a few days, Ben Zoma passed away. (Jerusalem Talmud Chagigah 9a)

מעשה בי ר' יהושע שהיה מהלך בדרך וכן
 זומא בא כנגדו שאל בשלומי ולא השיבו
 אמר לו מאיין ולאייין בן זומא אמר לו מסתכל
 הייתי במעשה בראשית ואין בין מים
 העליונים למים התחתונים אלא כמלא פותח
 טפח נאמר כאן ריחוף ונאמר להלן (דברים
 לב) כנשר יעיר קינו על גוזליו ירחף מה
 ריחוף שנאמר להלן נוגע ואינו נוגע אף
 ריחוף שנאמר כאן נוגע ואינו נוגע א"ר
 יהושע לתלמידיו ר' בן זומא מבחוץ ולא היו
 ימים קלים עד שנפטר בן זומא. (ירושלמי
 חגיגה דף ט.)

Leaving aside the interpersonal drama between two rabbis of great renown, this story weaves a thread between the opening chapters of the Torah and the final chapters of its close. Ben Zoma teaches that the world was born out of a "רוח מרחפת," a hovering wind.

1 In the beginning, God created the heaven and earth. 2
 And the earth was without form and void [*tohu va'vohu*];
 and darkness was upon the face of the deep, and the
 wind of God hovered upon the face of the waters.
 (Genesis 1:1-2)

א בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת
 הָאָרֶץ: ב וְהָאָרֶץ הִיְתָה תֵהוֹ וְבֵהוּ וְחֹשֶׁךְ
 עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי
 הַמַּיִם: (בראשית א: א-ב)

Like the hovering of the eagle's wings that signal a closeness-with-distance, so the earth was born out of the smallest gap between upper and lower waters "*nogeah v'aino nogeah*," touching yet not touching. The waters of the sky above and the waters of the oceans below sat (and sit) precariously close to each other, almost touching, almost flooding the whole world. (This frightful awareness was enough to drive Ben Zoma mad.) But 'almost' is the key. It was the tiny crack between them that enabled the universe to come into being. It was their delicate separation--*eino nogeah*--that was their protective holding. It seems that the cosmic order, the antidote to *tohu va'vohu*, depends on this very precious balance between touching and not touching.

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At the end of Moshe's life and at the end of the Torah, we are called back into consciousness of this sacred reality that birthed us. *Parshat Haazinu* tells us that the force that holds up the world is also the force that holds us up, touching and not touching, fluttering just close enough for us to feel the presence of our Source but staying just far enough away to enable us to stand. Placed here at this auspicious moment at the end of Moshe's life, we are no doubt meant to internalize and broaden the message. The world is sustained and we are sustained when we can both come extraordinarily close—to God and to other people—and also step back to make room for the agency of another. It is an exquisitely subtle line, indeed one that threatens the stability of the whole world. As such, it is a life sustaining one. We must learn to care fiercely without crushing those we love. We must learn to hover just close enough not to hurt those beneath our wings. And we must learn to fly, where we can, so that we might carry others.

In the words of R. Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook (1865-1935):

Human being, Rise up.	בן אדם, עלה למעלה עלה,
Rise up, for you have the strength to do so.	כי כח עז לך.
You have wings of the spirit, wings of powerful eagles.	יש לך כנפי רוח, כנפי נשרים אבירים.
Do not deny them, or they will deny you.	אל תכחש בהם פן יכחשו לך.
Seek them, and you will find them in a flash.	דרוש אותם - וימצא לך מיד.
(R. Kook, <i>Orot Hakodesh I</i> , pp. 83-84)	(הרב קוק, אורות הקודש).

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Sukkot, it seems, comes in tandem with this *parsha* to help us live out its message. To the eagle who "spread its wings" ("יִפְרֹשׁ כְּנָפָיו") to carry the Jewish people in the desert, we now ask "פרוש עלינו" ("spread over us your *sukkah* of peace"). Inside of a structure that is protective, but not overly much; sheltering, yet exposing, we might come to know a God who comes close, but not too close. Under the *schach*, in view of the stars, we just might get a glimpse of what it means to be both blessedly held and given the space to breathe and to be. Touched and not touched all at once. *Nogeah v'aino nogeah*.



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