Teachings That Fall Like Rain
Shabbat Ha'azinu (Deut. 32)
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There is a certain quiet that comes with Ha'azinu. After a book of speeches, laws, wanderings, rebellions, and reconciliations, Moshe doesn't end with a legal code. He ends with a poem, a song.

"Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak; let the earth hear the words of my mouth.
May my teaching fall like rain, my words drop like dew" (Deut. 32:1–2).

Why a song? Because if you've ever had a song stuck in your head you know that songs stick when prose and the details of a story slides away. Because a people about to cross over needs more

than instructions. They need a soundtrack, a little travelling music that can carry them when words fail.

Ha’azinu is the mixed tape of the Torah.

Our parasha opens with two witnesses: heaven and earth and offers three images that I want us to carry into this week, and the New Year. The Rain, not so hard to imagine here in Vancouver, The Rock. The Eagle, also not so hard to imagine in Vancouver.

1) Rain and dew: patient teachers

“May my teaching fall like rain, my words drop like dew.” Rain doesn’t accomplish its work in a moment. Dew is quieter, slower still. Torah, Moshe teaches, is

not a thunderclap. It is the daily, steady moisture that softens the soil of a life so something can grow.

A steady rain will erode the hard outer shell. The steady drip, drip drip, and drop, drop, drop of rain can carve a canyon. Think of the story of Rabbi Akiva.

Rabbi Akiva began life as an unlearned shepherd. Until the age of forty, he couldn’t read or study Torah. One day, while watching sheep near a stream, he noticed a small trickle of water falling steadily onto a rock.

He saw that the dripping water had **worn a hole** through the stone.

He said to himself:

> “If water, which is soft, can carve its way through rock, which is hard, then surely the words of Torah, which are as strong as iron, can carve their way into my heart, which is only flesh and blood.”

Inspired by this, Akiva went to study—beginning with children in the *cheder*—and slowly, drop by drop, became one of the greatest sages in Jewish history.

We know what it feels like when learning comes as a downpour of opinions. We are living through brittle conversations, especially around Israel, where people we love reach different conclusions about the same pain. Many of you have spoken to me about the distance this year between parents and adult

children, and the ache when someone you love hears you as a slogan instead of a soul.

Ha’azinu suggests another way. Teach like rain. Show up again tomorrow. Ask a question and leave space for an answer. Pause long enough to be changed by what you hear. If we want our Torah to take root, we can’t aim to win a debate. We can aim to water a heart.

2) The Rock: remember what is steady

“HaTzur, perfect is God’s work” — *The Rock, whole and faithful* (Deut. 32:4).

The poem contrasts God’s rock-solid steadiness with our human inconsistency. “Children unworthy of Him,” it says bluntly, “a crooked, twisted generation.” *Ha’azinu* is not sentimental. It knows we forget, we

get distracted, we grow “fat and kick” like Yeshurun, that poetic name for Israel later in the song.

The people, once upright and dependent on God, have grown “fat”—physically prosperous and self-satisfied—and now “kick” against their source of blessing, like a spoiled animal that rebels against its caretaker. To borrow a metaphor apt for this season—by which I mean the baseball season—the Israelites act as if they were born on third base and think they hit a triple. It’s an image of spiritual arrogance born of comfort.

We know that world well. Ours is an age that prizes cleverness over conscience, success over integrity. The prevailing ethic seems to be: *do whatever you can get away with.* We have replaced covenant with

contract—transactions instead of relationships, personal rights without communal responsibility. Covenant says, *I am bound to you even when it costs me.* It restrains our appetites; it teaches patience; it reminds us that freedom without obligation collapses into self-interest.

Our ancestors understood that the health of a society depends on covenant: shared moral commitments that no one is free to break without wounding everyone else. Covenant is what turns a crowd into a community and a nation into something more than a marketplace. Without it, we drift into cynicism and mistrust, into the endless outrage cycles that make even good people cruel.

So what is our rock? Not a platform. Not a party. Not even a national identity. Our rock is a moral grammar: the image of God in every human being, the demand to pursue justice, the insistence that power serve the vulnerable. Covenant slows us enough to ask, before we speak or post or decide: Who will be harmed by my next word? Who will be sheltered by it?

Ha'azinu reminds us that faithfulness is not rigidity; it is endurance. When the world is swept up in the fever of self-justification, covenant is what keeps our feet on solid ground—the Rock beneath the rain.

3) The Eagle: strength that carries, gentleness that teaches

“Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that hovers over its young, spreading its wings, taking them, carrying them on its pinions” (32:11–12). It is an astonishing image of God and a template for leadership and parenting. The eagle does two things: it stirs the nest and it hovers close. It pushes the young toward flight and it refuses to abandon them while they learn. Courage and tenderness. Challenge and presence.

Many of us were pushed into flight this year. Into public conversations we didn’t want. Into unfamiliar positions at work or school. Into grief we did not choose. Ha’azinu’s eagle says: do not confuse gentleness with weakness. Real strength is proximity. To hover is to protect, to mentor, to stay close enough that when someone falters, your wing is already there.

The Torah's image of the eagle has always moved me because it's about proximity. The opposite of holiness isn't profanity—it's distance. The eagle is God's refusal to be distant. It hovers. It stirs, but it doesn't abandon. It's the divine model for what I've come to think of as covenantal presence—the act of being near even when you can't fix, solve, or save. Proximity is a form of prayer. It says: *you are not alone in this.*

In a world that prizes efficiency, distance masquerades as strength. We text instead of visit. We post instead of comfort. We confuse commentary for compassion. Ha'azinu's eagle reminds us that real strength is staying close enough to feel another's trembling and steady them with our wing. The work of faith, the work of community, is proximity—it's to hover near one another through

uncertainty, to stay present when the flight is unsteady, and to trust that being near is sometimes the most courageous act we can offer.

Memory as practice

Midway through, the song commands: “Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations. Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders and they will say to you” (32:7). It is a call to resist amnesia. The wisdom we need is not only written in books. It lives in people. Ask your elders. Ask the ones who have crossed rivers you haven’t met yet. Ask the ones who learned how to love through disagreements and did not make enemies of their children. Ask the ones who know the cost of dignity and the joy of a life given to something larger than the self.

This is why eulogies matter, and why we spend so much time in our tradition on remembrance. Not to glorify the past, but to study it for courage. The stories we tell about our dead are classrooms for the living. They teach us which virtues survive the obituary — kindness, loyalty, generosity, faithfulness — and which accomplishments don't follow us into the next world. Ha'azinu turns that insight into a national curriculum for the Jewish people.

What song do we sing now?

In this New Year, let your teachings be like rain. If you are in a conversation where you feel yourself or the other hardening, try dew. Bring one gentler word than you planned, one question that makes space for the other to stay at the table.

Anchor yourself to the Rock. Before you post or argue or decide, ask: is this steady with my deepest commitments? Does it honor the image of God, pursue justice, tell the truth, protect the vulnerable? Is this kosher, is it menschlikte?

Be the eagle. If you are a parent or grandparent aching over distance, hover without smothering. If you are a child or grandchild impatient with your elders, remember how often someone carried you while you learned to fly. Push each other to courage, but stay close.

Ha’azinu leaves us where Torah always does — between heaven and earth, called to make meaning here in this space in between. To teach gently, to stand firmly, to stay near. Not finished but becoming.

Shabbat shalom.