

Torah Weekly

ד"ס

Why Sing Sad Songs?

"Listen heavens and I shall speak, and let the earth hear the words of my mouth."

This is the opening verse of the song of Haazinu, the song that Moshe recited to his people on the day of his passing. The song is poetic, powerful and poignant. After a few introductory verses, there is a description of G-d's kindness to the Jewish people:

He found them in a desert land, and in a desolate, howling wasteland. He encompassed them and bestowed understanding upon them; He protected them as the pupil of His eye. As an eagle awakens its nest, hovering over its fledglings, it spreads its wings, taking them and carrying them on its pinions. The song continues with the prediction that the Jews would eventually turn away from G-d:

Yeshurun (Israel) became fat and kicked.... You forgot G-d who made you. You began to serve idols that are new; your fathers never imagined them.... I will hide my face from them I will see what will be their end for they are a generation of changes; they are not [recognizable] as My children whom I have reared.

What follows is a story as sad as Jewish history:

I will link evils upon them. I will use up My arrows on them. They will sprout hair from famine, attacked by demons, excised by Meriri. I will incite the teeth of livestock upon them, with the venom of creatures that slither in the dust. From outside, the sword will bereave, and terror from within; young men and maidens, suckling babes with venerable elders.

The song closes on a positive note, predicting that ultimately, "The nations will cause His [G-d's] nation to rejoice, for He will avenge the blood of His servants ... and He will atone His land, His nation."

This song was sung quite often in the Holy Temple. Every day, while the priests would offer the daily offerings, the Levites would accompany the service with music and songs of praise from King David's book of Psalms. All of the songs sung were joyous and were meant to imbue the service with a spirit of joy, in fulfillment of the commandment to "serve the Lord with joy."

Surprisingly, the song that the Levites sang every Shabbat, as the priests offered the Musaf offering, the additional offering for the Shabbat, was non-other than the Song of Haazinu. They would sing one section per week, completing the song every six weeks.

Why this song? Isn't this the wrong message for the occasion?

Granted, the sections sung on week one, two and six, are indeed inspiring, but what about the weeks in between, the portions of the song that foretell the tragedies that would befall our people? How could a person feel uplifted while the Levites were singing, "I [G-d] said I will cause them to be forgotten, their remembrance will be destroyed from mankind"?!?

The answer is, in the weeks that the Levites sang the bitter parts of the song, they were teaching us how to overcome the tragic stanzas of our lives. The Levites were teaching us to be patient as we allow the song to unfold.

We should not expect to wake up each and every day of our lives and hear a joyous song playing in our ears. There will be days when we hear no song, when all we can hear is lamentation. Yet, the message of the Levites is that each stanza is part of a larger song, which can be heard in full only if we come back next week for more. Ultimately, we will persist, and we will find the joy. We will then realize that the difficult part of the road is just that, a road to a deeper and more meaningful joy.

When everything is going well it is difficult to feel complete joy. Part of us is always worried that the blessings in our life will not last. We can't be fully happy with our successes, because deep down we fear that we may lose them. We can't fully celebrate our relationships, because deep down we are worried that they may end. The young couple, whose love is pure, is not fully happy because they are not sure whether their love is deep enough to survive a major conflict, whether it is strong enough to overcome pain and resentment. Only when the relationship survives deep challenges can the joy be complete. For only then do we know that the bond is unbreakable.

The Torah portion of Haazinu is always read in the month of the holidays, in the month that contains both the days of awe, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, as well as the days of joy, Sukkot and Simchat Torah. In the beginning of the month we face the pain created by our weakness. We think about the sins of the past year, we think about the pain of separation caused by sin, the pain of separation from G-d and from people we sinned against. In the days of awe, we overcome the pain, we return, we reconnect. And then we realize that our relationship with G-d is deeper and stronger than we imagined. We realize that our bond with G-d is unbreakable. That no matter how much pain we caused, no matter how far we tried to run, He has been waiting for us—waiting for us to return, waiting to accept us, waiting to embrace us.

We discover that the intense joy of Sukkot and Simchat Torah is possible only after we experience the days of awe. We discover that all parts of the journey are integral to intense joy. We discover that they are all part of the same song.

No matter what life brings us, we remember that we are in the middle of a song. If we keep singing, keep playing the notes, we will discover the music. We will discover that there was music all along.

Menachem Feldman

Are We Destined to Stay the Same?

"It is what it is."

Five words that creep into all sorts of conversation, rearing their ugly head in such a deceptively innocuous way. Whether it's about politics, social ailments, or the bug that flew into your chicken salad, it's everywhere.

One columnist discovered its first known use in a 1949 edition of The Nebraska State Journal, in a column discussing the way that pioneer life molded character: "New land is harsh, and vigorous, and sturdy. It scorns evidence of weakness. There is nothing of sham or hypocrisy in it. It is what it is, without apology."

If you'll ask, most people don't really love the term. "What do you mean, 'It is what it is'?" Are you just resigning to fate?"

So what's the correct approach? Should we be upset at the "It is what it is" people, or do they have a point, after all?

Our Torah portion contains the answer.

This week's *parshah* is a beautiful soliloquy from Moses with high rhetoric and song-like meter. The verses are both enigmatic and

PARSHAT Haazinu

September 13-19, 2026

Tishrei 2-8, 5787

Torah Reading

Haazinu: Deuteronomy 32:1-52

Hosea 14:2-10; Micah 7:18-20

Calendars

We have Jewish Calendars. If you would like one, please send us a letter and we will send you one, or ask the Rabbi/Chaplain to contact us.

Family Programs

Do you have family on the outside struggling? Please contact or have them contact our office to learn more about our family programs. You and they are not alone, we are here to help.

Grape Juice & Matzah

We offer free Grape Juice and Matzah for you to be able to make the blessings every Shabbos. Please have your chaplain / Rabbi contact us to enroll (available to all prisons).

Sacred material please do not desecrate

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poignant, as Moses calls upon heaven and earth to bear witness and exhorts the people to follow in G-d's ways. Tipping its cap to *Haazinu's* profound and moving nature, we find the following halachah:

Whoever is called to read from the Torah should begin [his reading] with a positive matter and conclude with a positive matter. However, in *Parashat Ha'azinu*, the first [person called to the Torah] reads until *zechor yemot olam*. The second begins from *zechor yemot olam* [and continues] until *yarkivehu*. [These verses do not speak of positive matter]...

Why is the Torah reading paused at these points? Because these are [verses of] rebuke, [and the intent is that] that they motivate the people to repent.

We take great pains to end any *aliyah* in the Torah on a positive note, even cutting stories at awkward points if necessary. But *Haazinu* is an exception, because the *teshuvah* it is designed to evoke is just too important to give up.

Considering the time of year we read this *Parsha*, we can appreciate this exception even more. After all, *Haazinu* is always read right around Yom Kippur—a high time for Teshuva (repentance) if there was any.

But for many, the term *teshuvah* is either depressing or intimidating. “Repentance” is probably even worse, as it conjures up images of fasting, self-rebuke, shame and guilt.

Is there any positive way to think about *teshuvah*? Is there a way to imagine *teshuvah* as something empowering and encouraging, rather than a beat-down from G-d?

Take a look at this quote from Maimonides:

All the prophets commanded [the people] to repent. Israel will only be redeemed through *teshuvah*.

The Torah has already promised that, ultimately, Israel will repent towards the end of her exile and, immediately, she will be redeemed. While we sit here agonizing over the prospect of “doing *teshuvah*” and actually changing our ways, here we learn that the ending has already been written: it's going to happen. Whether you're ready or not, the Torah, apparently, has already scripted the grand finale, and in the script it says that we're all going to do *teshuvah*.

Let's break that down in more practical terms.

Have you ever heard people say, “I'm just not that guy,” “It's just not who I am,” or some other form of resignation that declares to the world, “Whatever I am now is who I am forever, and it ain't gonna change”?

You probably have.

You may have even said it yourself at some point.

One person is stuck in a rut in his relationship, resigned to the fact that at least once a week, he's going to be bickering with his spouse, irritated and upset.

Another person is caught in a massive loop of unhealthy eating habits, pounding cheesecake in the morning and downing sugary drinks in the afternoon.

This dynamic plays out regarding religious commitments, too.

“Go to shul every week? Nah, I'm not that guy.”

“Bring a kosher meal for a work lunch and garner awkward stares when I unwrap the less-than-seemly tuna sandwich? Nope. That's just not who I am.”

“So I don't light Shabbat candles on time. You think I should be lighting earlier each week? Come on, it's not happening. It is what it is.”

What's the simple answer to all these narratives?

You *are* that guy! Who ever said you're not? Which author wrote your book and already sold it on Amazon, never to be changed? No one, of course! This is a story that you've created in your head, and guess what? It's simply not true.

In an alternate script, in the Torah's script, you, me, and everyone else have already made the decision to do *teshuvah*. That whole “I can't do the Kosher tuna lunch” thing is a false narrative, and it absolutely is *not* what it is. The Torah has a different narrative waiting for you, already now, even before you've realized that you can be different. Go ahead and follow that script.

Aharon Loschak

IN JEWISH HISTORY

Sunday, September 13, 2026

2 Tishrei, 5787

First Shabbat (3760 BCE)

Today marks the first Shabbat, when G-d rested after creating the world for six days:

G-d completed on the seventh day His work that He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work that He had done. G-d blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, for then He rested from all His work that G-d created to do (Genesis 2:2–3).

To commemorate this day, we are instructed to keep the day of Shabbat holy and rest from all work:

Remember the day of Shabbat to sanctify it. For six days you shall work and perform all your labor, but the seventh day is Shabbat to the L-rd your G-d; you shall not perform any labor...For [in] six days the L-rd made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is within them, and He rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the L-rd blessed the day of Shabbat and sanctified it (Exodus 20:8–11).

Monday, September 14, 2026

3 Tishrei, 5787

Assassination of Gedaliah (423 BCE)

Tishrei 3rd is a fast day mourning the assassination of the Jewish royal Gedaliah ben Achikam, governor of the Land of Israel for a short period following the destruction of the First Temple. Gedaliah's killing spelled the end of the small remnant of a Jewish community that remained in the Holy Land after the destruction. They soon fled to Egypt. (According to many opinions, the assassination of Gedaliah actually occurred on Rosh Hashanah, but the commemoration of the event is postponed to the day after the festival).

Tuesday, September 15, 2026

4 Tishrei, 5787

Passing of R. Yoel Baal Shem (1713)

R. Yoel Baal Shem was a saintly rabbi and miracle worker who led the Society of Hidden *Tzaddikim* (righteous men) after the passing of its leader, R. Eliyahu Baal Shem.

Wednesday, September 16, 2026

5 Tishrei, 5787

Rabbi Akiva martyred (134)

The great Talmudic Sage Rabbi Akiva was taken captive by the Romans on Tishrei 5 of the year 3894 from creation (134 CE). His subsequent torture and execution is recalled in the stirring *Eleh Ezkarah* poem of the Yom Kippur service.

Thursday, September 17, 2026

6 Tishrei, 5787

Rebbetzin Chana (1964)

Tishrei 6 is the *yahrzeit* of Rebbetzin Chana Schneerson (1879-1964), mother of the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

Friday, September 18, 2026

7 Tishrei, 5787

Birth of Zebulun

Zebulun, the son of Jacob and Leah, tenth of the Twelve Tribes, was born on the 7th of Tishrei. He lived to be 110 years old.