

Ha'azinu

September 23, 2017

הָאֲזִינוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם, וְאֶדְבְּרָה וְתִשְׁמַע הָאָרֶץ, אִמְרֵי-פִי

Deuteronomy 32:1 *Give ear, O heavens, let me speak; let the earth hear the words of my mouth.*



In the cycle of the annual reading of the Torah, *Ha'azinu* is the last portion to be recited and studied. The very final chapters of the Torah, Deuteronomy 33 and 34 are earmarked for the holiday of *Simchat Torah* when the scroll is both completed and begun again in celebration of a new year of Torah reading. The opening words of *Ha'azinu* link heaven and earth, reminding the people (and subsequent generations) that the legal and historical narrative of the Jewish people, recapitulated here in Moses' final words, is one that merges both spiritual and earthly realms.

When it comes to telling the story of the people of Israel and their attachment to Israel, we ask ourselves, what belongs and where should we begin? Should the biblical accounts, the spiritual aspirations, and the generations of liturgical development all be included in the story of Israel? Does telling the story of Israel from ancient sources, crediting a Jewish presence in the Land of Israel as a Divine reward, conflict with telling it from the year 1948, or even with the onset of modern Zionism in the late 1800s?

When it comes to the problematic aspects of biblical Israel, one needs to reconcile present-day sentiments with very difficult passages recorded in sacred Jewish texts. Biblical critics address that dilemma, viewing much of the tough narratives to be later retrojections--people trying to understand the way in which Jewish presence arrived in, and developed on, the Land of Israel.

Alex Sinclair writes about the challenge of how, and from what sources, to teach Israel's history to Jewish day school students when the purpose is to help them build their Jewish identity. Sinclair asked a rabbi and two professors of Modern Israel to consider the question of how to construct Jewish identity based on, and enhanced by, the teaching of biblical connections to the Land of Israel. One respondent contends that teaching Israel beginning from biblical sources is not powerful in identity formation, rather first-hand experience will deepen student's identities and attachments to Israel. Another, CIE founder and president Dr. Ken Stein, insists that teaching the story of Israel in an engaging and animated manner, beginning with biblical foundations and showing the painstaking process of nation-building, would in fact imprint a "memory" within students. Hearing and understanding the story of Israel told in this fashion, students would connect to the Land of Israel and share in the pride of building a national home, thereby enhancing

their core Jewish identity. Even with the difficult passages and political mistakes along the way, Israel should be taught to young Jews from ancient connections through the present day.

Looking through the lens of politics, Daniel J. Elazar, founder of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, states, “The political experience of ancient Israel remains the foundation of the Jewish political world view, particularly as it pertains to the organization and government of the Jewish people.” Elazar considers the study of biblical Jewish history crucial to understanding the political structure of Israel today, reinforcing the value of teaching the origins of Israel from earliest biblical times.

Ultimately, Sinclair, Stein, and Elazar conclude that teaching history with the inclusion of biblical connections is the most responsible and, likely, the most affirming way to develop a greater understanding and attachment to Israel. As Sinclair states, “To be an Israel-engaged Jew today means to find ways to live with that vast chasm between history and memory, and, despite the temptation, to discard neither.”

Discussion Questions:

What are the challenges of teaching Israel’s history from biblical texts?

Conversely, what are the challenges of teaching the history of Israel leaving out the biblical texts and subsequent classic sources?

How should we treat events, decisions and discussions, whether from ancient or modern sources, that do not portray Israel in the most positive light?

Additional Resources:

Daniel J. Elazar, [Covenant & Polity in Biblical Israel: Biblical Foundations & Jewish Expressions](#) - [Chapter 1](#), Transaction Publishers, May 1, 1998

Alex Sinclair, [Between History and Memory in Israel Education](#), in Ravsak, Winter 2014

Kenneth W. Stein, “[What Works in Jewish \(Israel\) Education](#), Ravsak, Spring 2009