

## Counting Our Harvest

*Shabbat Ha'azinu 5776*

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In ancient Israel, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur were not the High Holy Days. Yes, those spiritual holidays of the soul's renewal were observed in the Jerusalem Temple of old; they just weren't the most important annual occasions. Three times each year, everyone was required to appear at the Temple: On Sukkot, on Passover and on Shavuot.

These three festivals all celebrate harvests. The spring holidays mark the most important ingathering, of the grain. However, the fall festival, Sukkot, was considered the most important. The rabbis called it *hechag*, "the" festival, the highest annual holiday of all.

In Israel, you see, rain doesn't fall in the summer. Never. Sukkot marks the beginning of the rainy season, absolutely critical to the grain harvest in the spring. Our ancestors prayed for rain on Sukkot. Failure to do so would lead to disaster.

When our ancestors were exiled from the Land of Israel and dispersed, these harvest festivals became less important, especially Sukkot. Rain does fall in Arkansas in the summer – during most summers, anyway. Residing in lands where weather patterns don't match Israel's, Sukkot continued to be observed, of course, but without the primary importance it held in biblical days.

On Sukkot, we pay lip service to agricultural harvest. Most of us don't consider the source of our food beyond the grocery store. We may say that we're thankful for successful agriculture that brings us the food we need, but those words risk ringing hollow. When we get home from Kroger and unload those bags, hopefully the reusable kind, we hardly see our purchases as our harvest.

So what harvest do we count?

Perhaps we can take a hint from Moses. We read *Ha'azinu* on the Shabbat preceding Sukkot each year. The portion isn't chosen because of any connection to the approaching festival, but only because it comes up at this time in the annual cycle of readings. Still, I wonder if it's a coincidence.

Moses is delivering his final oration to the Children of Israel. After leading this fractious people through four decades in the wilderness, Moses is about to

bid them farewell. His life is coming to an end. He will not enter the Promised Land with them.

*Ha'azinu* is a poem, perhaps even a song originally. It may be considered Moses's last Will and Testament. He extols the greatness of God. He warns the people of the ill that will befall them if they are unfaithful. In sum, he dispenses his final wisdom to his flock.

Earlier in his life, Moses had been a shepherd, a caretaker of sheep. For the last forty years, though, he has been a different kind of shepherd, keeping the flock of Israel together and guiding them on their journey. Like you and me, Moses doesn't have an agricultural harvest to celebrate. Moses's harvest is his wisdom, which he gathers and celebrates in the hearing of all the community, reciting *Ha'azinu*.

Each of us also has a harvest. As Sukkot approaches, let each of us consider that harvest – not only at the end of our lives, but right now, as the festival approaches.

Let us celebrate our families – the spouses and partners, the children and parents, the brothers and sisters – who give meaning to our lives. As we stand under the Sukkah, let us give thanks to God for the bounteous love we have been granted.

Let us celebrate our work. Our Israelite ancestors earned their living by farming. Whatever our work may be, its produce is our harvest. When a doctor has treated a patient, the healing is the physician's harvest. When a teacher has taught a lesson, learning is the teacher's harvest. When a construction worker has put up a wall, the building in which it stands is the laborer's harvest. When the student has completed meaningful assignments, new knowledge is the harvest. When the attorney has counseled a client, that advice is the lawyer's harvest. When the salesperson has closed the deal, the sale itself is the harvest. Perhaps the best analogy, whatever our work, is that our income is our harvest. Our ability to feed and clothe and house ourselves – and, where applicable, our families – is a harvest we can all truly celebrate.

Let us celebrate our faith. When we transmit Judaism to the next generation, our Jewish future is our harvest. When we feed the hungry, those full bellies are our harvest. When we make a donation to a synagogue, and we receive a tax receipt, the acknowledgement affirms that we have received nothing but “an intangible religious benefit.” Much of our practice of Judaism is indeed

intangible. When we fulfill a religious commandment, simply having served God is our harvest.

As I was completing this sermon today, I heard about the resignation of the Honorable John Boehner, Speaker of the United States House of Representatives.

On the one hand, the timing is entirely fitting: Speaker Boehner cannot unite his caucus in the House. Right or wrong, he has become the issue among House Republicans. He strongly opposes shutting down the government, which he believes not to be in his party's best interest or good for our nation. He determined, or he was forced to agree, that the only way he could avoid a government shutdown at the end of this month was to announce his resignation.

On the other hand, the timing of Speaker Boehner's resignation is ironic. As he looks back on his career in public service, he may judge his greatest harvest to have been the majority he mustered in the House of Representatives after years when his party had been in the minority. However, seeing him on television this week, we may conclude that Speaker Boehner will understand his most bountiful harvest to have been in presiding while His Holiness the Pope addressed a Joint Session of Congress and the nation. Speaker Boehner is a faithful Catholic. He is of a generation of Catholics who faced religious discrimination. A young John Boehner never could have imagined that he could be seated behind the Bishop of Rome, before Congress and the American people.

Moses's final Testament, while filled with wisdom, includes severe castigation of the Children of Israel and their wonted ways. Perhaps Speaker Boehner's last words, too, will excoriate his House colleagues for their divisiveness, for their excessive partisanship, for the ills that led to his resignation. Or maybe he will savor that moment with Pope Francis, letting go of power with grace, satisfied with the harvest of his life of service, however incomplete.

At the very end of this week's portion, God calls Moses to the summit of Mount Nebo. There, God invites the shepherd of Israel to look out over the Land of Israel. We may say that God invites Moses to celebrate his ultimate harvest: the good land to which he has led God's people.

Let all of us, during this upcoming week of Sukkot, and every day of our lives, be grateful for the harvest that God has granted us.

Amen.