Vayelich oct 5, 2019 dvar

Vayelich is like a preface and a conclusion. It serves to introduce us to moses’s final words which come in the form of what he calls a song; and it ends by saying, here is the song. It would take someone stronger willed than I not to have turned the page and read what followed. What does follow,

 הַאֲזִ֥ינוּ הַשָּׁמַ֖יִם וַאֲדַבֵּ֑רָה וְתִשְׁמַ֥ע הָאָ֖רֶץ אִמְרֵי־פִֽי׃ Give ear, O heavens, let me speak; Let the earth hear the words I utter!

is so powerful it is hard to resist continuing.

So this is an advertisement for next week. Tune in. Whoever chants will have a real challenge.

Give ear, o heavens. Everything in this parshah is a call to listen when Moses is saying, here are my final words. And yet in the saying, he sums up what we have been hearing throughout all of passages in which he spoke since the departure from Egypt. Obey god’s commandments; I know you will fail to do so; you will suffer; but the children will return from exile; god will punish you who are wrongdoers, who fail to keep the faith with god, who fail to keep the covenant. But god is chesed and rachoon, is loving, kind and merciful, will forgive you and take you back.

Over and over the punishments are detailed in torah, the forgiveness and merciful nature of god appears in haftorah, and this parshah is no exception.

But bear in mind doug maffot’s excellent dvar on rosh hashana, in which he retitles the brit, the covenant, a deal. the agreement with god, the bond, the tie that binds us as jews with our god, Adonai elohenu, when he calls it a deal. That’s what trump would call it.

My father began his career in business as a real estate broker. He made deals. If there was no deal, we had no money, and my mother had to go out to work, as an electrolysist, as it so happens. She worked in a small hospital in the Bronx on the grand concourse, and when we moved to mt Vernon, she had to go out regularly to put the bacon on the table (we were not kosher). I often cried when she left, and once even ran after the car so she would take me along.

When she was done, we bought rye bread, sometimes I had my feet measured in those xray machines in the florsheim shoe store next door, so you could see if the shoes fit, and you could also see your bones. My uncle worked in that same hospital, so our family got free dental care, and I learned to have my teeth drilled with no novocaine, since we were family.

Mishpacha. We had a covenant with god, we were jews, we had corned beef and rye at delis, we attended high holidays as a family, and I had to go to Hebrew school for my bar mitzvah.

I knew exactly what it meant to be jewish; I knew from Hebrew school, and especially from the playground, what it meant to be good, what we should not do to be a fag, about the worst thing you could be in elementary school. And I learned to play the piano from my aunt Elizabeth.

How can the god of today speak now? 2019, my heavy years of 76 on my head, an Adonai no longer Lord in our prayer books, an Elohenu we are to share with others we had once called goys…how can moses’s god speak to me, to us, to any of us, the way he had when he was called he in the 1940’s and 50s, when we were closer to questions of survival, when antisemitism meant no jews in Bronxville, in country clubs, much less in the white house. I like ike. My parents voted for Stephenson. He was closer to being like a jew than Eisenhauer.

God is a war god today. I will carry on as though I am speaking for today’s congregations, but really, it is just me, and as an Africanist I recognize all the war gods of Africa, perhaps especially the one I know best, Ogun, the Yoruba war god, who demands obedience and sacrifices from his followers, who is a god of iron, but also of palm wine, and who in his blindness and rage when he enters into war is so filled with transcendental rage that he can not distinguish his followers from his enemies. The blood that stained god’s garments in isaiah’s haftorah reading last week was like that; grapes that left their stains on god’s clothing, signs of such punishments as to create fear and trembling in the most stalwart of those who had thought they were keeping the covenant.

3A wine press I trod alone, and from the peoples, none was with Me; and I trod them with My wrath, and I trampled them with My fury, and their life blood sprinkled on My garments, and all My clothing I soiled.

Repeated over and over, these refrains of the verses of worship: god is awesome, god is powerful, god will spill the lifeblood of the grapes on all that is there. Our parshah echoes

this service of the wargod whose anger was to be feared:

31:3The Lord, your God He will cross before you; He will destroy these nations from before you so that you will possess them.

4And the Lord will do to them, as He did to the Amorite kings, Sihon and Og, and to their land, [all of] which He destroyed.

5And [when] the Lord delivers them before you, you shall do to them according to all the commandment that I have commanded you.

6Be strong and courageous! Neither fear, nor be dismayed of them, for the Lord, your God He is the One Who goes with you. He will neither fail you, nor forsake you."

But we are soon told, we will fail him.

16And the Lord said to Moses: Behold, you are [about to] lie with your forefathers, and this nation will rise up and stray after the deities of the nations of the land, into which they are coming. And they will forsake Me and violate My covenant which I made with them.

17And My fury will rage against them on that day, and I will abandon them and hide My face from them, and they will be consumed, and many evils and troubles will befall them, and they will say on that day, 'Is it not because our God is no longer among us, that these evils have befallen us?'

18And I will hide My face on that day, because of all the evil they have committed, when they turned to other deities.

19And now, write for yourselves this song, and teach it to the Children of Israel.

this song will bear witness against them,

22And Moses wrote this song on that day, and taught it to the children of Israel.

KI is a wonderful place to be a jew today, because we have a community of people who share enough, and in such a way, as to allow us to say without fear, this is who I am, this is what I believe, this is our chevra, even if we don’t always agree on everything. My question is why is it always to the haftorah that I have to turn, when I turn away from the god of war. Here is the beautiful text of hosea: 5I will remedy their backsliding; I will love them freely, for My wrath has turned away from them. 6I will be like dew to Israel, they shall blossom like a rose, and it shall strike its roots like the Lebanon. 7Its branches shall go forth, and its beauty shall be like the olive tree, and its fragrance like the Lebanon. 8Those who dwelt in its shade shall return; they shall revive [like] corn and blossom like the vine; its fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon.

 Let Hosea’s beautiful images be our song of today for the children to learn.