

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Ha'azinu, Deuteronomy, Chapters 32 | October 5, 2024

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

Spaces in the Song and the Defeat of Evil

It is an episode involving an eerie echo of a biblical tale. At Nuremberg, on October 16, 1946, some of the leaders of the Third Reich were taken to be hanged. The first was Julius Streicher. As *Newsweek* reports, he did not die with dignity:

He had to be pushed across the floor, wild-eyed and screaming 'Heil Hitler!' Mounting the steps he cried out: 'And now I go to God.' He stared at the witnesses facing the gallows and shouted: 'Purimfest 1946.'

"*Purimfest*" is a reference to the Jewish holiday of Purim, which marks the tale told in the Book of Esther: the rise of Haman as vizier of Persia and his attempt to wipe out the Jews. In the end, Haman himself is hanged on the gallows, and later, following a war against Haman's Jew-hating allies, Haman's ten sons are hanged as well. In invoking Purim, Streicher was alluding to an anti-Semitic trope that had a long German lineage, for Martin Luther had ridiculously insisted that the Jewish celebration of Esther's story is a sign of bloodthirstiness.

As I described in a column in *Commentary*, for Jews searching for signs of Providence, the invocation of Esther striking. Hitler was indeed a modern-day Haman, and those hanged at Nuremberg were his spiritual sons. And eerily, exactly ten of them went to the gallows; eleven were sentenced to be hanged at Nuremberg, but Herman Goering committed suicide in his cell the night before. This link between Haman and Hitler reminds us why Jews actually celebrate Purim: not, as Luther maliciously suggested, because we are bloodthirsty, but rather because the tale of Esther reminds us that evil must be fought before it is too late.

The tale of the ten sons of Haman is also, in a way, linked to our *parashah*. To understand fully how this is so, we must look beyond the text of the Torah reading itself, and learn, almost literally, to read between the lines.

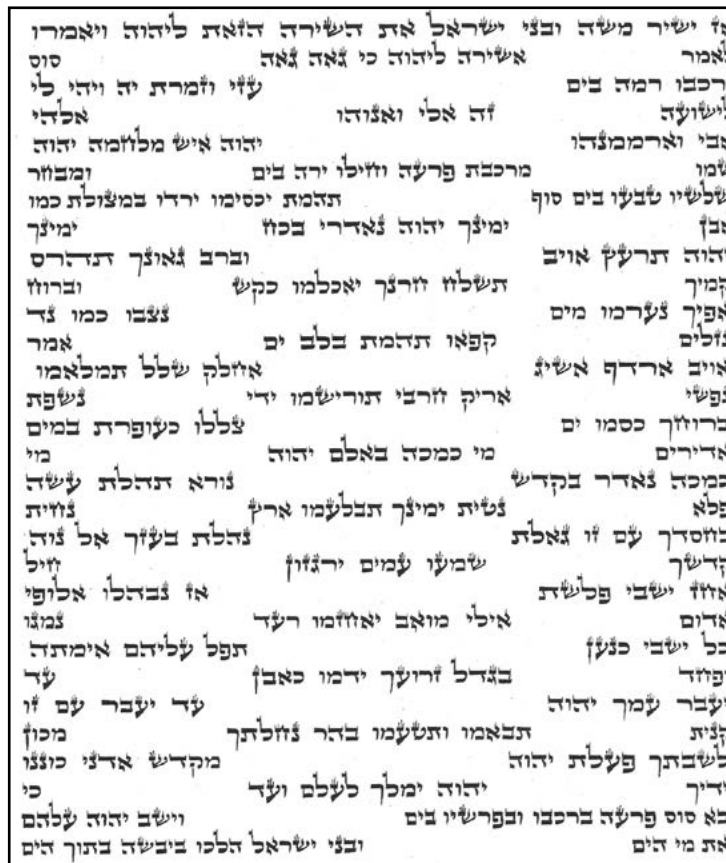
Our *parashah* is largely a valedictory song sung by Moses, whose opening words are quite well known:

Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak;
and let the earth hear the words of my mouth.
May my teaching drop as the rain,
my speech distil as the dew,



as the gentle rain upon the tender grass,
and as the showers upon the herb.
For I will proclaim the name of the Lord.
Ascribe greatness to our God! (Deuteronomy 32:1-3)

The words of the song itself are beautiful, but what is perhaps just as remarkable is what lies between them. In the Torah, songs are written differently than prose; instead of regular paragraphs, the text is broken up with large spaces. Thus in Exodus, Moses' exultant song following the splitting of the sea is written in a Torah scroll in the following manner:



Why must a scriptural song contain spaces? The message, my grandfather once suggested, is that songs are so much more than words: they have elements—musical, emotional, spiritual—that words alone cannot capture. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in making a similar point, once cited the English novelist Arnold Bennet, who put it this way: “music is a language which the soul alone understands but which the soul can never translate.” Building on this, Rabbi Sacks wrote,

There is an inner connection between music and the spirit. When language aspires to the transcendent and the soul longs to break free of the gravitational pull of the earth, it modulates into song. . . . Words are the language of the mind. Music is the language of the soul.

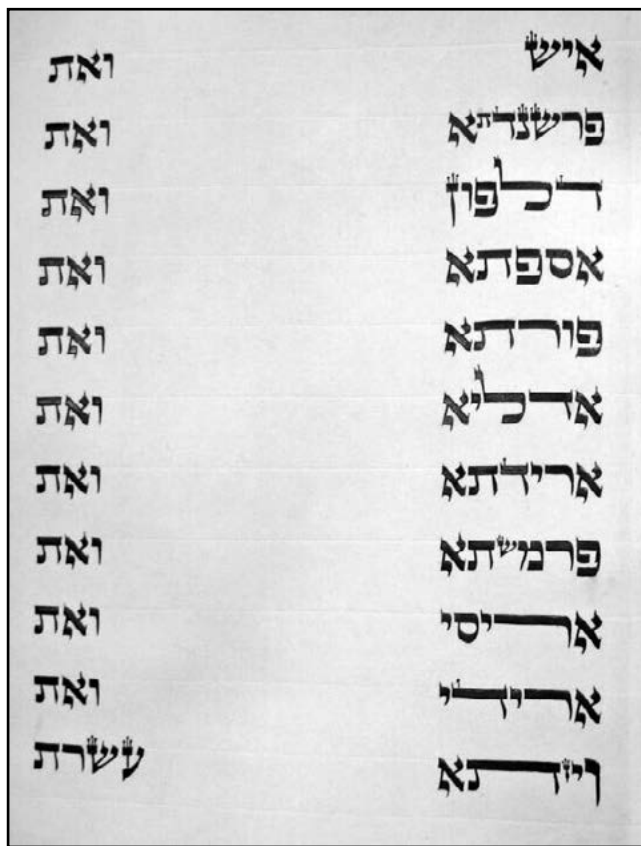


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The spaces, then, in a scriptural song, embody the aspects of the song that the words cannot express.

This scribal tradition is interesting in itself, but it becomes even more fascinating when we realize that other passages in Hebrew Scripture are also written with large blank spaces. Thus, in a *megillah*, the scroll of the Book of Esther, the description of the defeat of the ten sons of Haman is written the following way:



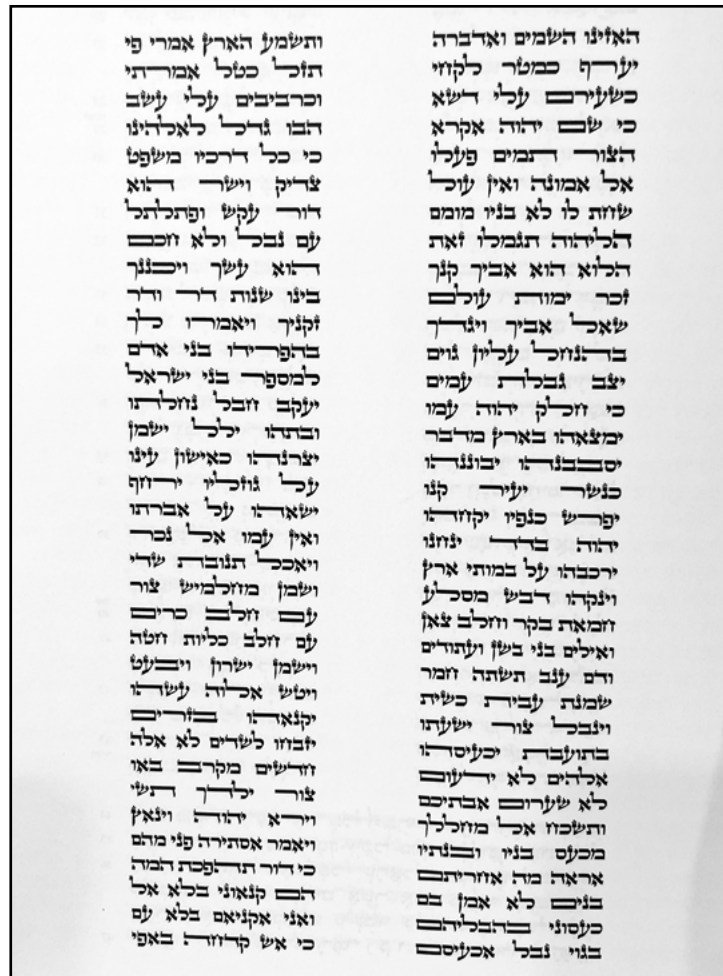
Despite the similarities in layout, we can observe a fascinating contrast: Moses' song at the shores of the sea has interspersed spaces in a large and broad paragraph, whereas the sons of Haman are written as tall narrow columns. The two formats, according to the Talmud, are meant to embody different modes of construction from ancient times. Moses' song represents a structure of bricks that are broad and "interlocked," with the phrases representing larger and smaller bricks spaced out over a particular area. The text thus embodies a building that is large and enduring—that will last. In contrast, a narrow edifice that had height but not width would, in a more ancient age, soon collapse; the sons of Haman are therefore enumerated on the parchment in a way that indicates their ultimate downfall.

Thus, scriptural description of evildoers, like scriptural writing of a song, contains spaces; and perhaps the spaces in between the account of evildoers, like the spaces in a song, represent that which cannot be expressed. Our own ability of expression, no matter how gifted, cannot in any way adequately explain why evil is allowed to exist and to exert malign influence with its awful impact on our world. But we simultaneously assert, through scribal



tradition, that God's people will outlast the evildoers who threaten it in every generation; like the column in the *megillah* listing the sons of Haman, the enemies of the Jewish people will ultimately fall.

At this point, we can take note of something startling. When we turn to Moses' song at the end of the Torah, in our *parashah*, and study the way it is written in a Torah scroll, we discover that, unlike the song at the shores of the sea, this song is written in tall columns, similar to the list of the sons of Haman in the *megillah*:



Why would this be? If the narrow columns of the *megillah* intimate, for tradition, the ultimate defeat of evil, why would a song by Moses be written in a like manner? One possible explanation, connected to the approach of the medieval sage Rabbeinu Nissim, is that the layout of the scriptural song that brings Deuteronomy toward its conclusion parallels the style found in the Book of Esther because the conclusion of Moses' final song also speaks of the defeat of evil, and the punishment of those who attacked, assaulted, and murdered members of God's people. Moses' song in our reading of *Ha'azinu* concludes with a verse that has appeared in Jewish prayers composed following massacres of our people, and it is a verse that has real resonance after the past year:



Praise his people, O you nations;
for he avenges the blood of his servants,
and takes vengeance on his adversaries,
and makes expiation for the land of his people. (Deuteronomy 32:43)

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ultimately die on a Jewish holiday. Asked by his friend how he has such foresight, he confidentially replies: "because any day that Hitler dies will be a Jewish holiday."

In fact, the day on which Julius Streicher and his fellow Nazis went to their deaths in Nuremberg was indeed a Jewish holiday: not Purim but the seventh day of Sukkot, known as Hoshanah Rabbah. This day falls immediately before Shmini Atseret; this day was celebrated this past year on October 6.

A day after, evil horrifically made itself manifest once again. Looking back almost a year later, we have much to mourn; and when we hear, on Rosh Hashanah, the wordless cry of the shofar, the cry will, like spaces in Scripture, express the reality that words alone cannot suffice for certain things; words alone cannot express our pain at all that evil has wrought. But if this past year has been a difficult one, it has also featured some of the most inspiring Jewish moments in recent memory: episodes of courage, heroism, resilience, and faith. And we can celebrate as well the defeat of evil that is ongoing in the campaign in which Israel has brilliantly and courageously engaged. Encouraged by the scriptural guarantee of the ultimate downfall of the enemies of the Jewish people, we pray on Rosh Hashanah for righteous victory, and for many reasons for jubilant song in the year to come.

In the face of evil, Jews must learn from Esther and battle against their enemies; precisely in a world of insecurity and evil, Esther's heroism must be celebrated, and the downfall of the wicked must be joyously marked. There is, as I noted in *Commentary*, great wisdom in the old joke, supposedly originating in the 1930s, in which a Jew predicts that Hitler would

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Additional Resources

Rabbi Meir Soloveichik on the Hanging of Julius Streicher, "Nuremberg, 75 Years After," *Commentary*, December 2020. [Click here to read.](#)

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks on the Spiritual Power of Music, "Music, Language of the Soul," February 2012. [Click here to read.](#)

