

It strikes me that today could be called a sandwich moment in this year's Jewish calendar. We are – as we all know - in the *yamim hanora'im*, the 10 days of awe between Rosh haShana and Yom Kippur. And this Shabbat's parashah is Ha'azinu, the overwhelming last song of Moshe, sandwiched between the comprehensive account of God's loving guidance of his people out of the slavery in Egypt to the promised land and the Moshe's blessing over all the tribes of Israel just before he dies. Ha'azinu more frequently occurs on the Shabbat after Yom Kippur and before Sukkot, than between Rosh haShana and Yom Kippur – due to the complicated intricacies of the Jewish calendar. But this year – 5784 – Ha'azinu is read on Shabbat Shuva focussing on the everybody's soul searching how and where to turn back/return to God and His guidance, the Torah. Naturally the learned men and women offering me support in preparing my derasha encourage me to find good and strong words, or even chide you in order to make you turn back, to do teshuva. Quite frankly, this is - to use a very old-fashioned English figure of speech - above my station. I would feel cold on the moral high ground. Or to phrase it more precisely, I'm highly suspicious of anybody claiming moral high ground. And that suspicion also applies to me. In our days there is definitely no shortage of topics which call for our teshuva. And there is a seemingly endless flow of sermons persuading us, coaxing us, pressuring us into teshuva. But the frequency of the appeals can have a numbing effect. Same business as usual – same procedure as every year. So, let's have a look at the text of our parashah. Moshe's song is beautiful and elaborate Hebrew poetry, even highlighted in the Torah scrolls in a particular way, writing the text in two columns which is highly unusual for any text in the Torah – and makes it for all those who read/leyn from a Torah scroll wonderfully easy to identify this text in the seemingly endless and unstructured flow of words usually found in the writing of the scroll. Obviously, this song is considered of special importance as is Shirat haYam, Moshe's first song after crossing the Red Sea, also highlighted by a very special lay-out in any Torah scroll. The sages immediately identify an eye-catching (at least for the sages) choice of verbs to express the process of speaking: "Give ear, O heavens, let me speak; Let the earth hear the words I utter!" (32:1) Let me speak – *adaberah* and let me utter *imrei-pi*. Two ways of speaking, the gentler way (*amar*) and the more outspoken harsh way (*dibbur*), two approaches to gently, or less gently reprimand a sinner and call them to teshuva. That is, as I mentioned earlier, not my cup of tea. After praising God, "the rock, who is faithful and never false" (32,4), Moshe reminds the people of Israel how God took care of them so mercifully. But they (we?) did not appreciate God's loving care. "They grew fat and forsook God" (32,15). "Wasting famine, ravaging plague, deadly pestilence" (32:24) ... struck them by the hands of their enemies. Quite a lot of good reasons for God to say: "I'm sorry, that's not what I meant my creation to be. Why not abandon that attempt and give it another try?" This question is not new in the Torah. "I have decided an end to all flesh..." (Gen 6:13); God decided to destroy Sodom (Gen 18), God decided to destroy the people of Israel for their transgressions; God decided to destroy them because of the Golden Calf (Exodus 32). Moshe's song in Ha'azinu takes a surprising turn. Not of because of His everlasting love, not because of God's compassion or His mercy but because of His pride. "But for fear of the foe, their enemies might misjudge and say: Our own hand has prevailed, none of this was wrought by haShem!" (32,27). No doubt, our world is in dire need of teshuva. Jews are fighting Jews – the main reason for the destruction of the First Temple. We can observe that daily in Israel and the fight to maintain a Jewish and democratic state. We can observe that in the Jewish congregation in Berlin and their squabbles for money, power, and influence. And we might observe it in our own lives. These days may encourage us to reflect, to think about what was good, what needs to change in my life, in my relationship with my family, with the people I live with and with the world, with the environment and with nature. What can I do so that we can all understand the great crises of our time as a challenge, as an opportunity? The monumental, epic last verse of Moshe's song carries a God's wonderful promise. "O nations, acclaim God's people! For He'll avenge the blood of his servants, wreak vengeance on his foes, and cleanse His people's land." (32:43). The haftara readings carry the same message. Hosea calls for teshuva and Micah crowns the message with the following praise of God: "Who is a God like You, forgiving iniquity and remitting transgression — Not staying angry forever toward the remnant of Your own people, because You love graciousness! God will take us back in love, quashing our iniquities. You will hurl all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will keep faith with Jacob, loyalty to Abraham, as You promised on oath to our fathers in days gone by." (Micah 7,18:20) Since I'm convinced that there is no such thing as "coincidence" I'd like to share with you what happened while I was writing this derasha. I needed a break and had to do some shopping. It had been raining and the evening sun broke through the clouds. A beautiful rainbow spanned the evening sky. Who would not immediately be reminded of God's promise: "This is the sign that I set for the covenant between Me and you, and every living creature with you, for all ages to come. I have set My bow in the clouds, and it shall serve as a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth, and the bow appears in the clouds, I will remember My covenant between Me and you and every living creature among all flesh, so that the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh." (Gen 9: 12-15) May you be inscribed and sealed for a good year.

Shabbat shalom!