Parasha Ha'azinu

הַאֲזִינוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם וַאֲדַבֵּרָה וְתִשְׁמַע הָאָרֶץ אִמְרֵי-פִי: יַעֲרֹף כַּמָּטָר לִקְחִי תִּזַּל כַּטַּל אִמְרָתִי כִּשְׂעִירִם עֲלֵי-דֶשֶׁא וְכִרְבִיבִים עֲלֵי-עֵשֶׂב:

There are passages of Scripture that comfort us, and there are passages that confront us. There are passages that cause us to lift our eyes toward heaven, and there are passages that force us to look into our own hearts. Deuteronomy 32, the great Shirat Ha'Azinu, the Song of Moshe, does both. It is at once a song, a covenant lawsuit, a prophetic warning, a remembrance of Israel's history, and finally a declaration of the faithfulness of God. And when we place this song beside Matthew 18:21–35, something remarkable happens. The Torah of Moshe and the teaching of Yeshua meet at the same spiritual crossroads: What do we do with the mercy we have received from God? Deuteronomy 32 begins: *"Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak; and let the earth hear the words of my mouth."* The Hebrew is magnificent: הַאֲזִינוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם — *Ha'Azinu ha'shamayim, "Give ear, O heavens."* Moshe is standing at the end of his earthly ministry. Israel is poised on the eastern side of the Jordan. The wilderness years are coming to an end. The generation that left Egypt has largely passed away, and a new generation is preparing to enter the land. Moshe knows something that Israel does not yet fully understand: entering the land is not the end of the story. Possessing the inheritance does not guarantee faithfulness to the Giver. Therefore, Moshe sings. And he calls heaven and earth as witnesses. Rashi, following Sifrei, explains that Moshe knew he was mortal. He would soon die. Israel could one day claim, "We never accepted this covenant." Therefore, Moshe appointed witnesses who would remain: heaven and earth. They would endure beyond Moshe and testify to Israel's covenant obligations. Rashi further explains that these witnesses would participate in Israel's blessing or judgment: heaven would give rain and earth would produce fruit when Israel walked faithfully, while creation itself would become a witness against Israel when she rebelled.

That gives us our first principle: God's mercy never cancels covenant accountability. We sometimes imagine mercy and judgment as opposites. Scripture does not. The God who forgives is also the God who judges. The God who establishes covenant is also the God who disciplines covenant-breakers. The God who says, "I will never leave you," is the same God who says, "Do not forget Me." The Song of Moshe is therefore not merely a song about Israel's failure. It is a song about the astonishing patience of God in the face of Israel's failure. And that brings us naturally to Matthew 18. Kefa—Peter—comes to Yeshua and asks: *"Adon, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"* Notice the question. Peter is not asking whether he should forgive. He already knows that he should forgive. He is asking: Where is the limit?

How many times must I absorb the offense? How many times must I extend mercy? How many times must I restore relationship? Peter proposes seven. Seven is not a small number. In Jewish thought, seven frequently represents fullness or completeness. Peter may have thought he was being extraordinarily generous. Some Jewish discussions of forgiveness appealed to the pattern of Amos, where repeated offenses are described in terms of three and four. Later rabbinic tradition preserves the idea that one should forgive another three times for a repeated offense. Peter's seven therefore sounds magnanimous. But Yeshua answers: *"Not seven times, but seventy-seven times."* Some translations render the expression "seventy times seven." The point is not that the disciple should keep a ledger until reaching 490 offenses. The point is that mercy is not to become a mathematical exercise. And here is where the Jewish ear should immediately hear an echo. In Genesis 4, Lamech speaks about vengeance. Cain is avenged sevenfold; Lamech boasts of vengeance seventy-sevenfold. Lamech represents the multiplication of retaliation. Yeshua takes the language of multiplied vengeance and turns it upside down. Lamech says, in effect: *"You hurt me, and I will make the price exponentially greater."* Yeshua says: *"You hurt me, and I will multiply mercy."* That is the kingdom of heaven. The world says, "You owe me." The kingdom says, "I have been forgiven." The world keeps records. The kingdom releases debts. The world remembers offenses in order to preserve resentment. The kingdom remembers grace in order to extend grace. And this is exactly where Deuteronomy 32 begins to speak to Matthew 18. Because the Song of Moshe is fundamentally a song about remembering. "Remember the days of old." Look back. Remember what God has done. Remember Egypt. Remember the wilderness. Remember the Rock. Remember the covenant. Remember the provision. Remember the God who carried you.

Rashi, commenting on Deuteronomy 32:7, brings the Midrashic tradition that Israel is to examine previous generations—the generation of Enosh, the generation of the Flood—and learn from God's dealings with humanity. Rashi also points toward the future, saying that Israel should recognize God's ability to bring about the days of Messiah and the world to come. That is an important principle of teshuvah. Repentance is not merely feeling badly about yesterday. Teshuvah means turning around because you have remembered correctly. Israel forgets God, and therefore Israel forgets who Israel is. The servant in Yeshua's parable has exactly the same problem. The king calls his servants to settle accounts. One servant owes an impossible debt—ten thousand talents. The amount is intentionally staggering. It is beyond the man's ability to repay. He is not simply behind on his payments. He is financially finished. He falls before the king. "Have patience with me, and I will repay you." But the king does something astonishing. He does not merely postpone the payment. He forgives the debt. The servant walks away free. Then he finds another servant who owes him a comparatively small amount. And what does he do? He grabs him. He demands payment.

The man pleads for patience using essentially the same language: "Have patience with me, and I will repay you." But the forgiven servant refuses. He has received mercy but refuses to become merciful. He has experienced selichah (forgiveness) but refuses to practice selichah. He has been released from a debt he could never pay, but he immediately begins demanding payment from someone who owes him comparatively little. That is the tragedy of the human heart. We want God to measure us by mercy and everyone else by justice. We want God to know our circumstances, but we want God to know everyone else's offenses. We ask God to remember our weakness and forget our sins. Then we remember everybody else's sins and forget their weakness. The servant's greatest problem is not that he owes the king. His greatest problem is that he has forgotten that he owes the king. That is why this parasha is so important. Moshe says, "Remember." Remember who God is. Remember what He has done. Remember that you were slaves. Remember that you didn't create your own redemption. Remember the wilderness. Remember the manna. Remember the water. Remember the cloud and the fire. Remember the Rock. Because if you forget the mercy that brought you here, you will become merciless toward the people beside you.

The Song continues: *"He found him in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness; He led him about, He cared for him, He kept him as the apple of His eye."* The Hebrew imagery is tender. Israel is not presented merely as a nation God tolerates. Israel is the child God carries. And then comes the tragedy: *"But Jeshurun grew fat and kicked."* יְשֻׁרוּן — Yeshurun, the poetic name for Israel, becomes prosperous and then forgetful. The problem is not merely that Israel has nothing. The problem is that Israel has received abundance and forgotten its source. That is one of the deepest spiritual dangers in Scripture. We think hardship will destroy us. Sometimes prosperity is more dangerous. When we are desperate, we pray. When we are hungry, we remember the Provider. When we are wounded, we seek the Healer. But when we become comfortable, we can begin to imagine that we are self-sufficient. The Midrashic tradition sees this danger clearly. The blessing itself can become the occasion of forgetfulness. And now Matthew 18 becomes even more penetrating. The servant has received the greatest imaginable blessing—release from his debt—but the blessing has not transformed his character. He has received mercy externally but has not allowed mercy to penetrate his lev, his heart. That is why Yeshua concludes: *"So likewise shall My heavenly Father do to you, unless you forgive your brother from your hearts."* Notice that phrase: "from your hearts." Not merely with the lips. Not merely religious vocabulary. Not merely saying, "I forgive you," while keeping the grievance alive internally. The biblical heart, lev, is the center of thought, will, desire, and moral identity. The question is not merely: "Have I said the words?" The question is: "Has grace changed what I am becoming?"

There is a beautiful Jewish teaching preserved in the Mishnah concerning Yom Kippur. Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah teaches that Yom Kippur atones for sins between a person and God, but sins between one person and another require reconciliation with the offended person. And Rabbi Akiva concludes with one of the great declarations of rabbinic Judaism: Israel is fortunate because it is purified before the Father in heaven, who Himself purifies Israel. That teaching stands remarkably close to the ethical world of Matthew 18. Yom Kippur cannot become a religious mechanism by which I avoid making peace with the person I have wounded. Likewise, grace cannot become a theological doctrine that permits me to remain unforgiving. Vertical forgiveness must produce horizontal reconciliation. If I have truly stood beneath the mercy of heaven, I cannot remain permanently committed to withholding mercy on earth.

Now, let us return to Deuteronomy 32. Moshe says: *"The Rock, His work is perfect, for all His ways are justice."* The Hebrew word is **צוּר** — Tzur, Rock. God is the Rock. His work is tamim, complete, whole, without defect. His ways are mishpat, justice. And then Moshe asks: "*Is not He your Father who bought you? Has He not made you and established you?"* There is covenant language here. God is not merely Israel's judge. He is Israel's Father. This is precisely why Yeshua can teach His disciples to speak of *Aveinu shebashamayim, "our Father who is in heaven."* The Judge is Father. The Father is Judge. Mercy does not abolish righteousness. Righteousness does not abolish mercy. They meet in the character of God. This is why in Yeshua's parable, the unforgiving servant's actions are so offensive to the king. The servant has misunderstood the character of the master. The servant thinks the king's mercy was merely a transaction. It was actually an invitation. The king was saying: "I have treated you according to my compassion. Now go and live according to the compassion you have received." "I forgave you," the king said, "but you did not understand what forgiveness meant." That is the lesson. Forgiveness received but not reproduced has not yet reached the heart. And that is the great spiritual warning of Deuteronomy 32. Israel's problem was not merely rebellion. It was forgetfulness. Moshe says: *"You were unmindful of the Rock that begot you, and forgot the God who formed you."* The Hebrew is devastating: **שָׁכַח** — shakach, "to forget." Biblical forgetting is rarely merely a failure of memory. It is a failure of covenant consciousness. Israel does not forget that God exists. Israel forgets what it means that God exists. And Christians can do the same. Messianic believers can do the same. We can remember Yeshua intellectually while forgetting Yeshua relationally. We can remember the cross while forgetting mercy. We can remember our redemption while refusing to release someone else's debt. We can sing about grace while nurturing resentment. We can speak about chesed while practicing vengeance. But the Song of Moshe tells us: Remember the Rock.
And Matthew 18 tells us: Remember the debt you were forgiven.
Those are the same spiritual command.

Now we must be careful here. Forgiveness does not mean pretending that evil never happened. Forgiveness does not mean refusing appropriate boundaries. Forgiveness does not mean permitting abuse to continue. Forgiveness does not eliminate justice, accountability, restitution, or protection of the vulnerable. The God of Deuteronomy 32 is still the God of mishpat (justice). But forgiveness means that I surrender my personal claim to vengeance to the righteous Judge. I can pursue justice without becoming consumed by hatred. I can establish boundaries without carrying bitterness. I can acknowledge the wound without allowing the wound to become my identity. This is profoundly Jewish and Messianic. The Torah does not teach us to call evil good. It teaches us to entrust judgment to God. And Yeshua does not teach us to deny wrong. He teaches us that the disciple must not become a prisoner of the wrong committed against him. The unforgiving servant is literally imprisoned by his own refusal to forgive. That is the paradox. He thought he was imprisoning the other man. But he was imprisoning himself. Bitterness does that. Resentment builds a prison whose bars are made from memories. And often the person who hurt us is walking free while we continue carrying the offense. The king's mercy is designed to set us free. So, let us ask the deeper question: What does it mean to forgive "from the heart"? It means I stop demanding that the past be rewritten before I can obey God in the present. It means I can say: "They really hurt me." And also: "I refuse to become like the person who hurt me." It means: "I will not allow their sin to affect me." That may be one of the greatest definitions of forgiveness. Forgiveness breaks the chain of reproduction. Someone sins against me. I carry the wound. I retaliate. They retaliate. Someone else becomes wounded. The cycle continues. Lamech says, "Seventy-sevenfold vengeance." Yeshua says, "Seventy-sevenfold forgiveness." The kingdom of God interrupts the cycle.

And now the final section of Deuteronomy 32 brings us to an extraordinary place. God speaks of judgment, but He also declares that He will ultimately vindicate His people. The song moves through Israel's rebellion, God's judgment, the defeat of enemies, and ultimately the vindication of His servants. This is not merely a song of condemnation. It is a song of hope. Even when Israel has failed, God has not ceased being God. Even when His people wander, the covenant faithfulness of God remains. This is why Moshe's final words are so powerful. He stands on Mount Nebo. He can see the land. But he will not enter. He has come to the end of his earthly pilgrimage. And yet his final concern is not himself. He sings about God. He teaches Israel. He points them toward the covenant. He dies looking toward a promise he will not personally experience in the same way. There is something profoundly Messianic here. The servant of God gives his final words so that the people of God might live. And when we come to Yeshua, we encounter this pattern in its fullest expression. Yeshua stands before His disciples and speaks about forgiveness.

He knows that the road ahead will lead to Jerusalem. He knows betrayal is coming. He knows rejection is coming. He knows the cross is coming. And yet He teaches His disciples about mercy. He does not merely teach forgiveness. He embodies it. At the execution stake, He prays for those who are crucifying Him. The Messiah does not answer human violence with human violence. He absorbs the violence and answers with mercy. That is the heart of the B'sorah. The King has a servant who owes an impossible debt. That is us. The debt cannot be repaid. The account cannot be balanced. Religious performance cannot erase it. Good intentions cannot erase it. Our promises cannot erase it. We fall before the King. And the King has mercy. But the story does not end there. We leave the throne room forgiven. Then we encounter another person who owes us something. And heaven asks: "Will you remember the mercy you received?" That is the connection between Deuteronomy 32 and Matthew 18. Ha'Azinu says, "Remember." Matthew 18 says, "Forgive." And the bridge between them is the Rock. Remember the Rock, and you will remember where your salvation came from. Remember your salvation, and you will remember the mercy you received. Remember the mercy you received, and you will become capable of extending mercy.

This is not sentimental Christianity. This is covenant discipleship. The Jewish sages understood that repentance must eventually become visible in human relationships. Rabbi Akiva's teaching reminds us that reconciliation with one's fellow is inseparable from genuine spiritual purification. And Yeshua takes us even deeper. He does not ask merely that we perform forgiveness. He asks that we forgive from the lev, the heart. So perhaps the prayer we should pray is not: "Lord, make me forget what happened." Perhaps it is: "Lord, help me remember what You have done for me." Because sometimes the cure for resentment is not forgetting the offense. It is remembering grace. Remember the Rock. Remember Egypt. Remember the wilderness. Remember manna. Remember the water from the rock. Remember the covenant. Remember the mercy. Remember the cross. Remember the empty tomb. Remember the debt that you could never pay. Remember the King who canceled it. And then look at the person who owes you. Perhaps they owe an apology. Perhaps they owe restitution. Perhaps they owe you nothing anymore because the debt has been released. But whatever they owe, it cannot compare with the mercy that has already been extended to you. This is why forgiveness is not weakness. It is kingdom strength. The world says strength means making your enemy pay. The kingdom says strength means refusing to become your enemy. The world says: "Remember what they did." The kingdom says: "Remember what God did." The world says: "Keep the score." The kingdom says: "Drop the ledger." The world says: "Seventy-sevenfold vengeance." The Messiah says: "Seventy-sevenfold mercy." And this is where the Song of Moshe becomes our song.

Because Deuteronomy 32 ends with the vindication of God, the justice of God, and the faithfulness of God. Our confidence is not ultimately in our capacity to forgive. Our confidence is in the character of the Tzur, the Rock. He is perfect. His ways are justice. His compassion is greater than our rebellion. His covenant faithfulness exceeds our inconsistency. His mercy reaches farther than our failure. And in the fullness of time, that mercy is revealed to us in Messiah Yeshua. The Messiah comes not to abolish the Torah's revelation of God's character but to bring its deepest intention into the heart. The Torah says, "Remember." The Messiah says, "Forgive." The Torah says, "The Rock is faithful." The Messiah says, "Be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful." The Torah warns against forgetting God. The Messiah warns against receiving forgiveness while refusing to forgive. The Torah teaches covenant faithfulness. The Messiah calls His disciples to embody covenant mercy. Therefore, as we stand at the threshold of another season, perhaps this is the word we need to hear: Do not carry yesterday's debt into tomorrow's covenant. There are people who need to be released from the ledger we have kept against them. There are names that need to be brought before God—not so that we can rehearse the offense, but so that we can surrender it. There are wounds that need healing. There are relationships that may need reconciliation. There are boundaries that may need to remain. There are apologies that may need to be made. There are debts that may need restitution. But above everything else, there is a King who has forgiven us. And therefore, we pray: Aveinu Malkeinu — our Father, our King, teach us to remember. When we forget, remind us of the Rock. When we become proud, remind us of the wilderness. When we become bitter, remind us of mercy. When we count offenses, remind us of our own debt. When we want vengeance, remind us of the cross. When we want to close our hearts, remind us that You opened Yours. And when we cannot forgive in our own strength, teach us to stand beneath the mercy of Messiah until His mercy begins to flow through us.

For the final word over the people of God is not the failure of Israel. It is the faithfulness of God. Not the greatness of our debt. But the greatness of His mercy. Not the number of times we have fallen. But the steadfastness of the One who calls us to rise. Not seventy-sevenfold vengeance. But seventy-sevenfold mercy. And ultimately, not our righteousness. But the righteousness and faithfulness of the Tzur Yisrael, the Rock of Israel. May we therefore hear the song of Moshe. May we remember. May we repent. May we forgive. May we walk in chesed, rachamim, and teshuvah. And may the mercy we have received from the King become the mercy we extend to one another until the day when the Messiah reigns in righteousness, Israel is restored, and the knowledge of the glory of the Holy One fills the earth. Ha'Azinu. Give ear. Remember the Rock. Remember the mercy. And forgive from the heart.

b'Shem Yeshua, haMelech v'haMashiach Shelanu! Amein.
("in the name of Yeshua, our King and the Messiah! Amein.")