**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARASHAT HAAZINU**

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Dedicated by Steven Weiner & Lisa Wise in tribute to   
Mr. Yechiel Saiman of blessed memory. His presence in our community was such a privilege and treat for us, and he is very deeply missed.  We send our warmest wishes of comfort to his wife Chana and to all of their children and grandchildren.

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**Introduction to the Song of Haazinu**

**Rav Elchanan Samet**

**I. The prose framework within which the song of Haazinu is found**

The Song of *Haazinu* is found between two prose orations that serve as an introduction and a conclusion to it.

The prose introduction to the Song of *Haazinu* is found in the second half of chapter 31. Verses 16-30 of this chapter comprise two introductory orations to the song. The first consists of God's words to Moshe in verses 16-21:[[1]](#footnote-1)

31:16: And the Lord said to Moshe: Behold, you are about to sleep with your fathers;

and this people will rise up, and go astray after the foreign gods of the land, where they go to be among them,

and will forsake Me, and break My covenant which I have made with them.

17: Then My anger shall be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them, and I will hide My face from them, and they shall be devoured,

and many evils and troubles shall come upon them…

19: Now therefore write **this song** for you, and teach it to the children of Israel; put it in their mouths,

**that this song may be a witness** for Me against the children of Israel. 

20: For when I shall have brought them into the land which I swore to their fathers, flowing with milk and honey; and they shall have eaten their fill, and waxen fat;

and turned to other gods, and served them, and despised Me, and broken My covenant;

21: then it shall come to pass, when many evils and troubles are come upon them,

that **this song** shall testify before them **as a witn**ess; for it shall not be forgotten out of the mouths of their seed;

for I know their imagination how they do even now, before I have brought them into the land which I swore.

From verse 26 onwards in this chapter Moshe turns to the Levites. He hands them the book of the Torah whose writing he has just completed (with the addition of the Song of *Haazinu*), and he commands them to put this book of the Torah, which now has "this song," alongside the ark "that it may be there as a witness against you."[[2]](#footnote-2)In verses 28-30 he commands them:

28: Assemble to me all the elders of your tribes, and your officers,

that I may speak **these words** in their ears, **and call** heaven and earth **to witness** against them.

29: For I know that after my death you will ideal corruptly, and turn aside from the way which I have commanded you;

and evil will befall you in the end of days; because you will do that which is evil in the sight of the Lord, to provoke Him through the work of your hands.

30: And Moshe spoke in the ears of all the assembly of Israel the words of **this song,** until they were finished.

At this point begins the Song of *Haazinu*, which extends over forty-three verses in chapter 32, followed by the following concluding remarks:

32:44:And Moshe came and spoke all the words of **this song** in the ears of the people, he, and Hoshea the son of Nun. 

45: And when Moshe made an end of speaking **all these words** to all Israel,

46: he said to them: Set your heart **to all the words** wherewith I **testify** against you this day;

that you may charge your children therewith to observe to do all the words of this Torah.

47: For it is no vain thing for you; because it is your life,

and through this thing you shall prolong your days upon the land, where you go over the Jordan to possess it.[[3]](#footnote-3)

There are several linguistic and substantive connections between the introductory orations in chapter 31 and the song that follows:[[4]](#footnote-4)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| The introduction in chapter 31 | The song in chapter 32 |
| 1. 28: And I will call **heaven** and **earth** to witness against them  29: For I know that after my death you will **deal corruptly** | 1: Give ear, you **heavens**, and I will speak; and let the **earth** hear the words of my mouth  5:  Is **corruption** His? No; His children's is the blemish |
| 2. 20: For when I shall have brought them into the land which I swore to their fathers, flowing with **milk and honey; and they shall have eaten** their fill, and waxen fat | 13-15:  He made him ride on the high places of the earth  and **he did eat** the fruitage of the field; and He made him to suck **honey** out of the crag…  Curd of kine, and **milk** of sheep… But Yeshurun waxed fat… you did wax fat, you did grow thick |
| 3. 16: And this people will rise up, and go astray after the foreign gods of the land… and will forsake Me, and break My covenant… | 16-17: They roused Him to jealousy with strange gods… gods that they knew not…  15: and he forsook God who made him |
| 4. 17:  Then My anger shall be kindled against them in that day,  and I will forsake them, **and I will hide My face from them,**  and they shall **be devoured,**  and many **evils** and troubles shall come upon them | 19: And the Lord saw, and spurned, because of the provoking of His sons and His daughters.  20: And He said: **I will hide My face from them**…  22: For a fire is kindled in My nostril… **and** **devours** the earth with her produce…  23: I will heap **evils** upon them |

When we examine the Song of *Haazinu* against the backdrop of the prose orations between which it is placed, two important questions arise, which we will discuss in the following sections of our study.

**II. “What need did God see for this song?”**

Among the questions that the Abravanel poses at the beginning of his commentary to *Parashat Vayelekh*, he asks:

The twelfth uncertainty… What need did God see for this song? Are things stated in it that were not stated previously…?[[5]](#footnote-5) What then was the need for this song, and what is new in its promises?

The introductory orations to and the conclusion of the song emphasize several times that the role of the song is to testify against the people of Israel.[[6]](#footnote-6) The testimony of the song is directed toward the time when Israel's situation in their land will be at a low – "and many evils and troubles shall come upon them." Then Israel will understand why they suffered this decline: Because they abandoned God, who had been good to them in their land – for going after other gods, and breaking their covenant with God. Only that this warning had already been given to Moshe twice in God's words to Moshe in chapter 31 (vv. 16-18; 20-21), and once again in the words of Moshe that follow them (vv. 28-29). Why is this testimony, which is stated in the language of prose, not enough? Why is the testimony of this song necessary?

The answer to this question is given in God's words to Moshe, in two of the verses that define the role of the song as testimony against the people of Israel:

19: Now therefore write this song for you, and teach it to the children of Israel; **put it in their mouths….**

21: … that this song shall testify before them as a witness; **for it shall not be forgotten out of the mouths of their seed.**

Man's initial literary form of expression is not prose, but rather poetry. In the ancient cultures of the human race, poetry enjoyed an almost exclusive status as the tool of literary expression.[[7]](#footnote-7) This is how Prof. Y. H. Yerushalmi describes the matter in his book *Zachor*:[[8]](#footnote-8)

Oral poetry preceded… the prose narratives of the chroniclers. It may seem to the Hebrew reader even today that the remnants of [ancient] poetry, such as the Song of the Sea and the Song of Deborah, are imbued with a unique power of arousal, with the intensity of their archaic rhythm and images, distant but noisy echoes… of experiencing initial events…

In order for ideas to be absorbed not only in the consciousness – "and teach it to the children of Israel," but also in verbal memory – "put it in their mouths" - the poetic intensity and the characteristic qualities of poetry are necessary. These words of poetry will be remembered in future generations in their verbal form thanks to their rhythm, their images and the other artistic devices assigned to them.

Moreover, owing to the nature of our song, which expresses intense emotions through its unique means, its testimony contains elements that are not found at all in the prose orations that precede it. Let us demonstrate this. In its description of Israel's sin, the song emphasizes the extreme ingratitude reflected in their abandonment of God:

6: Do you thus requite the Lord, O foolish and unwise people? is not He your father that has gotten you? has He not made you, and established you?

The song then describes in spectacular pictures the goodness that God bestowed upon the people of Israel from the time He took them as His portion until He settled them in their land, the land of milk and honey (verses 7-14). Against this background, Israel's sin is described as a kick directed against their benefactor:

But Yeshurun waxed fat, and kicked; you did wax fat, you did grow thick, you did become gross;

and he forsook God who made him, and contemned the Rock of his salvation.

The motif of Israel's ingratitude and betrayal evokes in the heart of the reader anger and identification with their punishment coming from "a God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and right is He." It is difficult to create such feelings through a prose oration.

The breach in the trust between God and Israel and in the relationship between them, which is described in intense emotional colors (verses 19-22), leads to the inevitable result – the punishment of Israel, which is also depicted in bold images (verses 22-26).

Because of all of these differences between the song and its prose essence appearing in verses 16-17 in chapter 31, the song is not merely an **announcement** of what will happen to Israel should they worship idols, but rather it is a vigorous poem of rebuke, which **tries to prevent** the very thing that it warns against.

To conclude this section we wish to note that much of the song is not all alluded to in the prose orations that precede it. From verse 27 (and surely from verse 36) until the end of the song in verse 43, the song describes the sin of the enemies of Israel in what they did to Israel and their punishment at the hand of God,[[9]](#footnote-9) and, on the other hand, God's mercy for Israel who reached the state that "their stay is gone, and there is none remaining, shut up or left at large" (verse 36). This reversal in the song and in the historical reality embodied in it is not mentioned at all in God's words to Moshe in chapter 31, nor in the words of Moshe to Israel in that same chapter.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Ostensibly, this part of the song is not needed to fulfill its role as testimony against Israel about what will happen to them if they sin in their land and worship other gods, and perhaps for this reason this stage is not mentioned in the prose oration that precedes the song.

It is, however, truly necessary for the song's additional role as a poem of rebuke to prevent or push off to the extent possible the reality that it describes. The description of God's mercy on Israel and His anger with their enemies turns the song into a song concerning the covenant between God and Israel. The song's power to influence Israel and be preserved in their mouths as a testimony to future generations stems in large part precisely from this last section, which expresses God's basic relationship with Israel: a covenantal relationship which finds expression precisely when He is angry with them – when they are cast low.[[11]](#footnote-11)

We can therefore summarize and say that this song is greatly needed, and that nothing in the words of prose that precede it in chapter 11 or in previous chapters can serve as a substitute for its testimony and rebuke (and certainly not for its consolation) even in the present generation, and all the more so not for future generations.

**III. Was this song told to Moshe in a prophecy, or perhaps it is his words, like his entire oration in the book of *Devarim***

In God's words to Moshe in chapter 31, there are several references to **"this song"** (verses 19 [twice], 21, and 22) – which imply that the song already existed when God spoke with Moshe. Where then did it exist and from where was it given to Moshe?

The Ramban relates to this question in his commentary to verse 19, in which the existence of "this song" first appears:

And the meaning of "this song": **The song that I will tell you now,** namely, *Haazinu*. And he calls it a song, because Israel will always recite it as a song, and also it was written as a song, for songs are transcribed with breaks in accordance with the melody.

According to the Ramban, the Song of *Haazinu* was told to Moshe "now," immediately following these words ofGod, and Moshe immediately recorded the prophecy that he had received and spoke it in the ears of the entire congregation of Israel.

But this definition of the song as a prophecy that Moshe received from God must be examined in the body of the song: Who is the speaker in this song?

1: Give ear, you heavens, **and I will speak**; and let the earth hear **the words of my mouth.**

2: **My doctrine** shall drop as the rain, **my speech** shall distil as the dew.

Who is the first-person speaker in these opening verses: Is it God, or is it Moshe? Verse 3 resolves this doubt in unequivocal manner:

3: **For I will proclaim** the name of the Lord; ascribe you greatness **to our God.**

The speaker in the first person in verses 1-3 is, therefore, Moshe himself, while God is described in the third person. This continues also in the following verses: The people of Israel are sometimes described in the second person, and sometimes in third person, but God is always described in the third person. Let us illustrate this in several verses. In verse 6 Moshe turns to Israel in the second person and speaks about God in the third person:

Do you thus requite the Lord, O foolish people and unwise?…

Beginning with verse 10, Moshe speaks of both Israel and God in the third person:

He found him in a desert land… He compassed him about, He cared for him…

In verse 10 the wording changes with respect to Israel (from the third person to the second person, and then back again to the third person) – but with respect to God, it is always in the third person:

15: But Yeshurun waxed fat, and kicked, you did wax fat, you did grow thick, you did become gross, and he forsook God who made him…

Does God not speak at all in the first person in the Song of *Haazinu*? This is not the case: large sections of the song are cited from God in the first person. This is the case starting with verses 19-20:

19: And the Lord saw, and spurned, because of the provoking of His sons and His daughters.

20: **And He said:** I will hide My face from them, I will see what their end shall be.

From here God's words in the first person continue until verse 35.[[12]](#footnote-12) In verse 36, "For the Lord will judge His people," we come back to the words of Moshe, who as usual speaks of God in the third person. But in verse 37, "And it is said: Where are their gods," there begins once again a citation of God's words,[[13]](#footnote-13) which continues until verse 42. Only in the song's concluding verse, verse 43, do we come back to the words of Moshe:

43: Sing aloud, O you nations, of His people; for He does avenge the blood of His servants,

and does render vengeance to His adversaries, and does make expiation for the land of His people.

Is then the Song of *Haazinu* a prophecy that was given to Moshe in which God speaks in the first person, or is it part of Moshe's oration, and not different from the other parts of his grand oration, which spans across the entire book of *Devarim*?

Nothing in the long citations of God's words in the song changes the conclusion that emerges from an examination of the song as a whole: the Song of *Haazinu* is no different from the rest of the book of *Devarim*; it too is part of Moshe's grand oration. The change of the literary genre from prose to poetry does not indicate a change in the essence of the words or in the essence of the speaker. Moshe is the speaker in this song, and he cites the words of God among his own words, as he does frequently throughout his oration.[[14]](#footnote-14)

And yet there is a difference between the citation of God's words in Moshe's oration thus far and the citation of His words in the Song of *Haazinu*. The citations brought thus far in Moshe's grand oration are citations of what God had said to him in the past, in the various stages of Moshe's leadership of Israel. The citations in the Song of *Haazinu*, on the other hand, are citations of God's words that will be spoken in the future, in coming generations; what then is their source?

The answer to this question is that they are not really citations in the usual sense of the word: The song does not mean to say that in some future time God will utter the words placed in His mouth in the song (20-24): "I will hide My face from them, I will see what their end shall be… for a fire is kindled in My nostril… I will heap evils upon them; I will spend My arrows upon them… and the teeth of beasts will I send upon them, with the venom of crawling things of the dust…." This citation is a poetic device by way of which Moshe expresses in a vivid and impressive manner the change that will take place in the Divine policy toward Israel after they have sinned. These words of God in the song constitute a poetic expansion of what was said to Moshe earlier in prose (31:17): "Then My anger shall be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them, and I will hide My face from them, and they shall be devoured, and many evils and troubles shall come upon them."[[15]](#footnote-15) What was said to Moshe in a prophecy **as a factual account,** turns in the song into a vivid and detailed description from the mouth of God Himself, in which God spells out the actions that He will take with respect to Israel.

It is clear, then, that the song is based on a prophecy given to Moshe regarding the future of the people of Israel in their land, and that this prophecy (or part of it) is written before us in chapter 31:16-21.[[16]](#footnote-16) And yet the song itself is part of Moshe's grand oration, and it is his formulation, like the rest of the orations in the book of *Devarim*. Based on the prophecy that Moshe received from God, Moshe fashioned this prophetic content in a song containing testimony and rebuke which are **his own words.**

This conclusion, that the Song of *Haazinu* is a rebuke **of Moshe,** who rebukes Israel and testifies against them as part of the grand oration that he delivered to them, follows also from the prose introduction that Moshe prefaced to the song and from the words of conclusion that he uttered after it. In the introduction Moshe said:

31:28: Assemble to me all the elders of your tribes, and your officers,

that I may speak these words in your ears, **and call** heaven and earth **to witness against them.**

And in the conclusion to the song he says:

32:46: Set your heart to all the words **with which I testify against you** all day.

The implication is that it is Moshe who testifies against Israel when he utters the words of the song before them, and not that he proclaims before them the word of God who testifies against them.

This conclusion, that the Song of *Haazinu* is part of Moshe's oration, seems to contradict God's words to Moshe in 31:19: "Now therefore write this song for you, and teach it to the children of Israel; put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for Me against the children of Israel." From here, as may be recalled, the Ramban concluded that the song was said to Moshe as a prophecy from God.

The Abravanel addresses this contradiction in the fourteenth question that he raises at the beginning of his commentary to *Parashat Vayelekh*:

The words (31:29), "For **I know** that after my death you will deal corruptly, etc." indicate that Moshe did this on this own and on his own initiative. Since God commanded him to write the song and teach it to the children of Israel, why did he not say: Assemble to me all the elders of your tribes, and your officers, that I may speak in their ears **all that God has spoken to me** (instead of 'these words'), and in this way he would attribute the song to He who said it, which is God, who arranged it, and said it and gave it to him, and not attribute it to himself!

At the end of his commentary to *Parashat Vayelekh*, the Abravanel expands upon the proofs that the song was uttered as the words of Moshe himself:

The words (31:27), "For I know your rebellion, and your stiff neck, etc.," indicate that Moshe Rabbeinu did not say this song in the name of God to Israel… but rather he said it on his own, as if he composed and arranged it… in his own words… Therefore it is not stated in its regard: "And the Lord said to Moshe, saying," and it is not stated, "Speak to the children of Israel"; because he did not say it in the name of God, but rather in his own name, as if he arranged and composed it… Therefore he said at the end: "For I know your rebellion, and your stiff neck; behold, while I am yet alive with you this day, you have been rebellious against the Lord; and how much more after my death?" – as if to say that he… said this, and that he learned it by way of an *a fortiori* argument…

Therefore the words of the song are: "Give ear, you heaven, **and I will speak;** and let the earth hear **the words of my mouth,"** as if Moshe were speaking on his own, and he did not say, as Yeshayahu said (1:2): "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth, for the Lord has spoken."[[17]](#footnote-17)

The truth is that there is no real contradiction between God's words to Moshe in chapter 31 and our conclusion regarding the Song of *Haazinu*. Such a contradiction would exist had God said to Moshe: "Now therefore write this song for you **that I will say to you now**" (like the Ramban completes God's words in verse 19). But nowhere in chapter 31 does it say that "this song" was said to Moshe, or that it would be said to him, by God; the Ramban filled this in by way of logical reasoning, but not based on what is written in the text.

Nevertheless, it can be inferred from chapter 31 that when God spoke to Moshe the Song of *Haazinu* already existed. Thus we come back to the question that we raised at the beginning of this section: Where did this song exist?

Now that it has become clear that this song is part of Moshe's grand oration, we must inevitably conclude that it had already been composed by Moshe at some earlier point in order to serve as the high point in his grand oration that he delivered to the people of Israel. God commands Moshe to commit to writing the song that he had composed, and to teach it to the people of Israel, so that it may serve as testimony against Israel.[[18]](#footnote-18)

This leads to another conclusion: God's words to Moshe about Israel's future in their land after they will turn away from God and worship other gods were not new to Moshe (for it was based on these words, or similar words, that Moshe composed the Song of *Haazinu*),[[19]](#footnote-19) and they were told to him only so that they could serve as an introduction to the song and as an explanation for their need as testimony against Israel.

**IV. What is a “*Song*” – *Shira* – in the Bible**

It is not by chance that the Ramban connects two different issues in his commentary to *Devarim* 31:19 (cited at the beginning of the previous section):

1) And the meaning of "this song [*shira*]": The song that I will tell you now, namely, *Haazinu*.

2) And he calls it a song, because Israel will always recite it as a song, and also it was written as a song, for songs are transcribed with breaks in accordance with the melody.

His explanation of why the Song of *Haazinu* is called a *shira-*song seems trivial. The fact that it is written in a Torah scroll as a song is evident to all, and so too its special features, that are characteristic of this literary genre and turn it into a legacy in the mouths of Israel – "for it shall not be forgotten out of the mouths of their seed" – are also clear.[[20]](#footnote-20) What then did the Ramban see to speak about the matter at length?

The answer to this is that the second part of his remarks is a necessary consequence of his explanation in the first part. After establishing that the Song of *Haazinu* was given to Moshe in a prophecy by God, the Ramban comes to answer a serious difficulty: Where do we find in Scripture that God's word given by way of a prophecy is called a "song-*shira*"? The few Scriptural passages that are explicitly called by that term are all **human expressions[[21]](#footnote-21)** of praise for God:

*Shemot* 15:1: Then sang Moshe and the children of Israel **this song** to the Lord.

*Bemidbar* 21:17: Then sang Israel **this song:** Spring up, O well, sing you to it.

II *Shemuel* 22:1:[[22]](#footnote-22)  And David spoke to the Lord the words of **this song** in the day that the Lord delivered him out of the hand of all his enemies, and out of the hand of Shaul.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The Ramban answers this **question** by saying that the Song of *Haazinu* is in fact not a "song" in the sense of the term elsewhere in the Bible, and that it is called a "song" only because of its musical character and the way that it is written, regarding which it is similar to the other songs in Scripture.[[24]](#footnote-24)

These words of the Ramban bring us to pay attention to the word "song," *shira*. in the Bible. As was already mentioned, this is a rare term, found in only a few places in the Bible. The common term for words that are sung to a tune, and sometimes even accompanied by musical instruments, is *shir.*

What is *shira* in the Bible? Apparently, the term denotes words of praise and thanksgiving to God that are recited in response to a miracle that was performed for Israel (the splitting of the Sea of Suf, the well in the wilderness, Israel's victory over Yavin and Sisera) or that of their king (the Song of David). This definition does not apply to the Song of *Haazinu*, whether we understand it as a prophecy, as argued by the Ramban, or we interpret it as an oration delivered by Moshe "on his own," as was suggested in the previous section.

Below we will try to offer a different definition of the essence of a "song" in the Bible, a definition that only occurred to us after examining the words of *Chazal*, who relate in several place to the recitation of a song. From the words of *Chazal* it would appear that the "song-*shira*" that comes in the wake of a miracle is different from the ordinary gratitude that anybody for whom a miracle was performed is obligated to express.

In the days of Chizkiyahu king of Yehuda, Jerusalem was saved from the siege that was laid by Sancheriv king of Ashur, who had threatened to destroy it and exile its inhabitants. The angel of God passed through the camp of Ashur and smote the enemy soldiers, until they all died (II *Melakhim* 18-19; *Yeshayahu* 36-37), There is no account in Scripture of Chizkiyahu's response to this miracle, and therefore *Chazal* express the following criticism in *Sanhedrin* 94a:

The Holy One, blessed be He, wished to appoint Chizkiyahu as the Messiah, and Sancheriv as Gog and Magog; whereupon the Attribute of Justice said before the Holy One, blessed be He: Sovereign of the Universe! If You did not make David the Messiah, who uttered so many songs and psalms before You, will You appoint Chizkiyahu as such, **who did not recite a song [*shira*]before You** in spite of all these miracles which You wrought for him?

Does the silence of the Bible constitute evidence that Chizkiyahu, the righteous king, did not thank God at all? Elsewhere, the Talmud implies just the opposite. The Gemara in *Pesachim* 117a raises a question:

Rav Yehuda said in the name of Shemuel: The song in the Torah was uttered by Moshe and Israel when they ascended from the Sea [of Suf]. But who recited this *Hallel*?

In the continuation of the passage, the recitation of *Hallel* is attributed to various Biblical personalities, in whose days miracles were performed, and one of the answers is:

Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya said: Chizkiyahu and his companions uttered it when Sancheriv attacked them.

Unless we understand that these words of the Talmud disagree with what is stated in the Gemara in *Sanhedrin*, we must say that *shira* [song] and *hallel* [praise] are two different concepts.

Chizkiyahu, who was a righteous king, certainly fulfilled his duty to praise God for the miracle of his salvation. In doing so, he joined the many people, before and after him, who are mentioned in the same passage in the Gemara in *Pesachim,* as people who recited *Hallel* when a miracle was performed for them, and in that way they also fulfilled the enactment of the prophets to recite Hillel "at every epoch and at every trouble — may it not come to them! — and when they are redeemed, they recite it in thankfulness for their delivery."

But this is not enough. Chizkiyahu did not utter a "song" [*shira*], as he should have done after that great event. It would appear that the recitation of *shira* is not a clear duty or a fixed enactment, and that it depends on the special response of the person for whom the miracle was performed to the miracle performed for him. Had Chizkiyahu recited a song, his song would certainly have been recorded in Scripture, just as other songs are recorded in it. Scripture's silence regarding Chizkiyahu's reaction, even though it does not prove that he did not recite *Hallel*, indicates that he did not recite a song, and it is this that disqualified him from being the Messiah.

What then is the difference between reciting *Hallel* and reciting *shira*? It seems that these are two very different religious responses.

*Hallel* is often connected to the term *hoda'a*, gratitude. When man stands before God, and recognizes the truth that the good that entered his life came from the hand of God, he fulfills an elementary duty, that exists also in the relationship between man and his fellow. And even though with his gratitude and praise of the party from whom came this goodness, the person concedes his dependence on the grace of his benefactor, in the end his primary thoughts at that hour are directed toward himself: It is **he** who was in trouble, and it is **he** was saved from it by the grace of God; if he is not ungrateful, he must verbally express the gratitude that he feels toward Him who saved him from his troubles.

A *shira* that comes in the wake of a miracle is different. Here the person removes his personal connection to the event serving as the pretext for his song and exposes the Divine revelation in what happened. In such a song, the miracle is measured not with respect to the good received by the person for whom the miracle was performed, but, as it were, with respect to the advancement of the Divine interest "to establish the world in the kingdom of God." From the private event in which the miracle occurred the song derives general meaning. Human salvation becomes an instrument for the revelation of God, who guides human history in justice and righteousness, and the song itself is an instrument for exposing this revelation of God in history.[[25]](#footnote-25)

**V. The difference between the song of the sea and the song of *Haazinu***

Now the song of *Haazinu* can join the other songs in Scripture, even though it is not a song about a miraculous salvation, and, on the contrary, it is a song about the punishment that will be meted out for the sins of Israel. Despite this difference, the Song of *Haazinu* also deserves the name "*shira*," since it too reveals the hand of God that operates in history in justice and righteousness. Like the Song of the Sea, which describes the revelation of God in the world, precisely through the punishment of the wicked, so too in the Song of *Haazinu* – only that those who are punished are the people of Israel themselves (and only at the end of the song are Israel's enemies also punished).

There is also another difference between the Song of *Haazinu* and the other songs: The Song of *Haazinu* does not relate to a particular event, from which it derives general meaning, but rather it reveals God's intervention in the world in a wide-ranging historical process that extends for many generations.

The connection between the Song of *Haazinu* and the other great songs in the Bible necessarily defines it as a song that stems from a human source, like the other songs, and not as a prophecy. The very designation that is repeated several times, "this song," attests to the fact that it is a song that Moshe recited on his own, just as he recited the Song of the Sea in its time: "Then Moshe sang."

Defining the Song of *Haazinu* as a "*shira*" gives it a new aspect that we have not noticed until now. So far, our attention has been directed to the words of God that precede the song in chapter 31. These words emphasize the testimony of the song, testimony that is directed, as may be recalled, against Israel: "that this song may be a witness **for Me against the children of Israel.**" Defining the Song of *Haazinu* as a "song," whose source is human (and in this context it is important to note the conclusion of our discussion at the end of section III, that Moshe composed the song before God commanded him to turn it into testimony against Israel) – this definition takes note precisely of the song's appeal from Israel to God. This is a song in which Israel expose the revelation of God in their history, which involves praise and acclaim for God:

3: For I will proclaim the name of the Lord/ ascribe you greatness to our God.

4: The Rock, His work is perfect/ for all His ways are justice;

a God of faithfulness and without iniquity/ just and right is He.

Praise to God for His actions in the history of Israel is extensively laid out in verses 7-14, which describe God's selection of Israel and His acts of kindness toward them until He gave them the land. But even the description of God's wrath about the sins of Israel and of the punishments that He brings upon His people in verses 19-25 is an account of God's praise and righteousness, "for all His ways are justice… just and right is He." So too God's refraining from fully executing judgment with Israel, which is described in verses 26-27, is God's praise, i.e., that He acts according to universal human considerations in his desire to prevent the mistakes of the enemies who defeat Israel. And it goes without saying that the description of God's mercy on Israel and his wrath on his enemies and the description of the vengeance that He will carry out against them are also parts of God's praise.

It turns out, then, that the entire Song of *Haazinu* cries out **from below to heaven,** as a song of praise that the people of Israel sing to God. Through it they reveal the hand of God, which operates in their history in justice and righteousness, not only in times of miracles of salvation, but even in times when punishment and decline befall them.

This conception of the Song of *Haazinu* as the song of the people of Israel to God can serve as the connection between the two issues discussed in this study. On the one hand, this conception requires seeing the song as emanating from below, as a song recited by Moshe (a claim based at first on an examination of the style of the song). On the other hand, this conception of the song clarifies the very need for it – the question that we addressed in section II of our study: This song was written and recited at the end of Moshe's grand orations and at the end of the giving of the Torah to Israel, not only to testify against Israel and to warn them of the punishments that await them for their sins – "from above downward" – as is implied by its prose introduction, but also to serve in their mouths as a song that they will sing to God for all generations – "from below upward."

The activity of Moshe, the faithful agent, is coming to an end. Moshe is the prophet whom the Lord knew face to face, who was sent to bring Israel out of Egypt and give them the Torah. This one-time mission of Moshe stands between the two songs that he composes: the Song of the Sea at the beginning of his mission – a song in which Israel praise God for the signs and wonders that He performed when He took them out of Egypt; and the Song of *Haazinu* at the end of his mission – a song in which Israel praise God for having completed His kindness toward them by bringing them to their land and governing them according to the degree of their observance of His commandments.

All of the history of Israel stands between these two great songs, between the song of their becoming a people, the Song of the Sea, and the song of their becoming the people of God, who experience ups and down in their land in accordance with their actions and their recompense – the Song of *Haazinu*.

The last Mishna in tractate *Tamid* lists the "song that the Levites would recite in the Temple" with the daily offerings each day of the week. These are the chapters of *Tehilim* which we recite as "the song of the day" every morning at the end of the morning service. The Gemara in *Rosh ha-Shana* 31a adds to this list two additional occasions on which the Levites would recite a song in the Temple with the offering of sacrifices – on Shabbat. Only that the Levites' song on Shabbat did not include psalms from the book of *Tehilim*, but rather the songs that are written in the Torah:

At the additional sacrifice of Shabbat what did they say? Rav Chanan bar Rava said in the name of Rav: *Hazyv Lak* [Rashi: "The Song of *Haazinu*, which they divided into six sections" – for a cycle of six Shabbatot; the mnemonic indicates the place where the recitation of the song began each Shabbat, though the commentators disagree about several of the letters in this mnemonic].

Rav Chanan bar Rava also said in the name of Rava: As these sections are divided here, so they are divided [when the Song of *Haazinu* is read on Shabbat] in the synagogue. At the afternoon sacrifice of Shabbat what did they say? Rabbi Yochanan said: "Then sang" ["Moshe" on the first Shabbat of a three-Shabbat cycle]; "Who is like You" [the second half of the Song of the Sea on the second Shabbat]; and "Then sang" ["Israel, spring up, O well" on the third Shabbat of the cycle].

Not only in the Temple did the Song of *Haazinu* and the Song of the Sea serve together in Israel's singing to God, but also in the daily rites in the synagogue, as the Rambam relates in *Hilkhot Tefila* 7:13:

There are places where they are accustomed to recite the Song of the Sea, each day after they recite *Yishtabach*. Afterwards, they recite the blessings for the *Shema*. There are places where they recite the Song of *Haazinu*, and there are individuals who recite both of them. Everything is dependent on custom.

(Translated by David Strauss)

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1. These words of God to Moshe (beginning already in verse 14: "Behold, your days approach that you must die; call Yehoshua, and present yourselves in the Tent of Meeting, that I may give him a charge") are the first time in the book of *Devarim* that God speaks to Moshe over the course of Moshe's grand oration. Of course, Moshe himself constantly cites the words of God in his oration, but these are words of God that preceded the oration, whereas here we have the words of God that were received by Moshe during the oration itself and interrupt its course. (In 28:69 it is stated that God commanded Moshe to make a covenant with the people of Israel in the plains of Moav, but the command itself is not cited there).

   The next time that God will speak in our book will be below in the story of Moshe's death (32:48-52; 34:4). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is the way that the Ramban explains the relationship between this act of Moshe, described in 31:24-27, and Moshe's act described in verse 9 of that same chapter: "And Moshe wrote this law, and delivered it to the priests the sons of Levi, that bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and to all the elders of Israel":

   "For he first wrote the Torah and gave it to the priests, as was stated above, but he did not tell them where to place it. Afterwards he was commanded about this song and he wrote it and he taught it to the children of Israel that same day, and then added it to the Torah. 'And it came to pass, when Moshe had made an end of writing' everything in the book of the Torah, then he commanded the priests: 'Take this book of the Torah, and put it by the side of the ark of the covenant of the Lord.'" [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is where Moshe's prose oration in the book of *Devarim* ends. While these two verses, 46-47, come primarily to conclude the Song of *Haazinu* ("the words with which I testify against you this day" are the words of the preceding song), they contain some of the central motifs of the entire oration: the command to the sons – the coming generations – to observe all the words of the Torah; the identification of the observance of the Torah with life itself, "because it is your life"; the promise that observing the Torah in the land will bring to a prolongation of days upon it; and primarily, the conclusion with the words, "the land, where you go over the Jordan to possess it" – a look at the near future promised to the people of Israel, a future in which Moshe will have no part. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. We noted one key connection between them in our study of *Parashat Haazinu* 5760 (pp. 429-430 in our book): The introduction to the song clearly defines the period to which the testimony of the song relates – immediately after Israel's entry into the land and in the generations in which there was no real threat of exile. In those generations, Israel's punishment will be God's "hiding His face" that will bring upon the people "many evils and troubles," in the wake of which "they shall be devoured" by their enemies, but they will not be destroyed by them, nor will they be exiled from their land. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The continuation of the question that we omitted from this citation is: "which have not already been stated in the curses in *Parashat Ki-Tavo*… and all the more so with what was added in *Parashat Nitzavim* in the words of the covenant." In our study of *Parashat Haazinu* 5760 (pp. 427-432) we explained at length that the testimony of the song is distinguished from the testimony of the covenants that were made at Mount Chorev and in the plains of Moav: Whereas those covenants threaten about the punishment of exile that will come only after many generations, our song describes the quick decline that Israel will suffer immediately after their entry into the land if they worship other gods. Therefore we related the Abravanel's question to what was stated now in the introduction to the song; see below. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In the orations preceding the song in chapter 31, verses 19, 21, and 28; in Moshe's oration after the song – 32:46. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See what Assaf Anbari wrote about this in his article, "*Likrat Sifrut Ivrit*," *Tekheket* 9, Spring 5760, pp. 36-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Tel Aviv 5748, p. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Verse 27, "lest their adversaries should misdeem, lest they should say: Our hand is exalted, and not the Lord has wrought all this," certainly deals with the sins of the enemies into whose hands Israel has been delivered. The following verses, 28-35 ("For they are a nation void of counsel" until "Vengeance is Mine, and recompense, against the time when their foot shall slip") are the subject of a Tannaitic dispute in the *Sifrei* (322): According to Rabbi Yehuda, they relate to the people of Israel, whereas according to Rabbi Nechemya, to their enemies. This disagreement continues in the commentaries of the *Rishonim*. Most of the commentators agree with Rabbi Nechemya, but they are divided (Rashi explains verses 28-31 as referring to the enemies, while verses 32-35 refer to Israel; the Ramban explains the latter verses as well as referring to the enemies). In any event, there is no disagreement that from verse 36 on the song describes a reversal in which God shows mercy to Israel and takes vengeance from their enemies for what they did to His people in their wickedness. But according to the vast majority of commentators, this reversal begins earlier in the song. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The Abravanel already had difficulty with this in his last "uncertainty" that precedes his commentary to *Parashat Vayelekh.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. It is possible that this is what the Chizkuni means in his commentary to 31:21: "For it shall not be forgotten out of the mouths of their seed" – even though it contains several rebukes, at the end there are consolations." [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This really depends on the disagreement between Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Nechemya in the *Sifrei* (see note 9), who is "the nation void of counsel" referred to in verses 28-31. According to Rabbi Yehuda, that the reference is to the people of Israel, this section was recited by Moshe, for in verse 30 God is referred to in the third person (but even according to this opinion, God once again speaks in the first person in verses 32-35, in light of what is stated in verses 34-35: "Vengeance is mine, and recompense"); according to Rabbi Nechemya, that these verses refer to the enemy, verse 30 is a citation of what the enemy should have said to himself, in which case it too is part of the words of God (regarding verse 31, Rashi and the Ibn Ezra disagree whether these are the words of the enemy – included in the words of God – or the words of Moshe).

    What we have said in this note constitutes another consideration for preferring the interpretation of Rabbi Nechemya, for according to Rabbi Yehuda, the words of God alternate with the words of Moshe twice over the course of verses 20-38 without written notice. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This is the case according to the interpretation of Rashi and the Seforno, that verses 37-38 are the words of God stated to Israel with sarcasm. But many other commentators (Rav Saadya Gaon, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Ramban) maintain that the speaker in these verses is the enemy, and according to them, the direct citation of the words of God begins only in verse 39: "See now, that I, even I, am here." [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Already in the first sentence of the oration, in *Devarim* 1:6- 8, Moshe opens with a citation of the words of God: "The Lord our God spoke to us in Chorev, saying: You have dwelt long enough in the mountain. Turn you, and take your journey… Behold, I have set the land before you: go in and possess the land." Such citations, long and short, are found throughout the oration. In the oration in chapter 5, for example, there is a citation of God's words on Mount Chorev – all of the Ten Commandments. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See the comparisons that we made between this verse and other verses in chapter 31, and the Song of *Haazinu* at the end of the first section of this study. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. There are two reasons that this song cannot be attributed to this prophecy in chapter 31 alone: 1) As we shall see later in this section, the Song of *Haazinu* was composed by Moshe even before he was told the words of God in our chapter, and so perforce, he received such a prophecy, or something like it, already earlier. 2) The descriptions in the song of the vengeance taken from the enemy and of the mercy shown to Israel are not anchored in the prophecy given to Moshe in our chapter (see our remarks at the end of section II above), and we must conclude that these things were known to Moshe from an earlier prophecy. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. We omitted from the citation the Abravanel's answer to the question that he himself raised at the beginning of the *parasha* and we brought in the first citation of his words. The Abravanel fundamentally agrees with what is implied by chapter 31 that the Song of *Haazinu* was given to Moshe as it is by way of a prophecy, only that he argues that it was given to Moshe "**as if** he composed and arranged it… And that was that Israel should not say: Since the Holy One, blessed be He, tells us that this will happen [we will sin and be punished], the matter is clear to Him, and we no longer have a choice about it, because we are forced in our actions. For this reason [Moshe] relayed this to the people as if he had said it.. and he did not reveal that he said by way of Divine knowledge."

    But how did Moshe execute this deception: Did he do it on his own? The Abravanel answers: "God had already commanded him to do so when He said: 'Behold, you are about to sleep with your fathers… Now therefore write this song for you, and teach it to the children of Israel.' That is to say, that Moshe was to make this song, as if he on his own before his death was telling the future… not that God told him to do so." It is not clear how the Abravanel learns this from this verse. Perhaps he learns it from the phrase "write this song for you [*lakhem*]," regarding the likes of which *Chazal* expound "for you – from you."

    In any event, the Abravanel's answer seems far-fetched and complicated. If he already learns from the verse: "write this song for you," that Moshe was commanded to write the song "as if" he himself composed it, why does he not take the additional step and say (as we argued in the continuation of our words above) that Moshe in fact composed the song, and that it was not told to him in a prophecy? [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. A phenomenon of this kind, that Moshe fulfills in his oration – which is delivered in his own style and in his own words – a *mitzva* that he wascommanded by God, is a common phenomenon in his oration in the book of *Devarim.* (It is even possible that the oration in its entirety was delivered at God's command, as is stated in 1:3: "Moshe spoke to the children of Israel, according to all that the Lord had given him in commandment to them." But this is not the position of the Ramban in his commentary to the first verses in our book; see below in the continuation of this note). This is certainly true about the oration concerning the *mitzvot*, for many of the *mitzvot* that Moshe teaches Israel in his oration are "new" *mitzvot*. Indeed, this is explicit in Moshe's words at the beginning of the oration concerning the *mitzvot* (6:1): "Now this is the commandment, the statutes, and the ordinances, **which the Lord your God commanded to teach you, that you might do them** in the land where you go over to possess it." So too the covenant made at the plains of Moav – the blessings and curses in chapter 28 (and perhaps also the oration concerning the covenant in chapter 29) – were said by Moshe as part of his oration and in his own style (as is evident from the style of the blessings and the curses in chapter 28; see *Megila* 31b: "The curses in the book of *Devarim*… Moshe said them on his own") **at the command of God** (28:69): "These are the words of the **covenant which the Lord commanded Moshe** to make with the children of Israel in the land of Moav."

    Here is the place to briefly address a question concerning the whole of Moshe's oration in the book of *Devarim*. We have shown here that parts of Moshe's oration were said at God's command. But other parts of the oration were said wholly on his own. This is the position of the Ramban in his commentary to the first verses in our book:

    "Moshe took upon himself [*ho'il*]" (1:5) means that he wanted to explain to them the Torah, and this is mentioned in order to teach us that **it was on his own that he saw to do this, and that God did not command him about this,** in the sense of (*Shofetim* 19:6): "Be content [*ho'el*], I pray you, and tarry all night."

    How then did Moshe's words that "he said on his own" (as the Gemara says about the curses in the book of *Devarim*) become part of God's Torah?

    This matter has already been discussed by the great commentators across the generations (Ramban, in the introduction to his commentary to the Torah; Abravanel, in the introduction to his commentary to the book of *Devarim*; Rabbi D. Tz. Hoffman, in the appendix to his commentary to the book of *Devarim* [pp. 586-596, and see also pp. 602-603]. They all agree that "God wanted, after he finished saying them to Israel, that he write all this in the book of the Torah, as Moshe said it… Thus the saying of these words to Israel was from Moshe Rabbeinu, but the writing in the book of the Torah was not from him… but the writing of all this was from God **like all the words of the Torah,** for God agreed with what he said, and the words of the trusted agent were right in His eyes" (Abravanel, in his introduction to our book). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. We must arrive at this conclusion for another reason: The part of the song that deals with God's mercy for Israel and with the punishment that He will bring upon their enemies is not all alluded to in God's words in chapter 31. See above note 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See our remarks in section II above. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. This is what the Abravanel writes in his commentary to *Yeshayahu* 5:1: "Let me sing of my well-beloved, a song of my beloved touching his vineyard": "Know and see that every song found in the words of the prophets is something that they on their own arranged with the Holy Spirit, and that they did not see in a prophecy like other visions… And it is not the work of God, but rather the work of the prophet himself who arranged it… Since a song mentioned in the words of the prophets is something that they themselves arranged with the Holy Spirit, and was not comprehended by them at the level of full prophecy, therefore Scripture always attributes it to them, and not to God, as it is said regarding the Song of the Sea: 'Then **Moshe** sang'… and regarding the Song of the Well it is also said: 'Then **Israel** sang'… and similarly the Song of *Haazinu*… Moshe said it **as if** he himself arranged it… and similarly 'And Devora and Barak sang.'" The Abravanel repeats this in brief at the end of his commentary to *Parashat Vayelekh*.

    We join with the Abravanel's observation that a song always originates in the person reciting it, and not in prophecy, but not for the reason that he writes in his commentary to *Yeshayahu*, but for the reason that will be clarified later in this section. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. And similarly in its parallel – *Tehilim* 18:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. It may be possible to add to these *Shofetim* 5:1: "And Devorah and Barak the son of Avinoam sang," even though the word *shira* is not mentioned there at all. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Perhaps this should be formulated in a different way: Every "*shira*" in Scripture is called by that term not because of its content, but because of its form and the way it is sounded. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. According to this, *shira* has a role in advancing the world to recognize God and to accept the yoke of His kingdom. This is the key to understanding the words of the Gemara in tractate *Sanhedrin* quoted above that Chizkiyahu was rejected from being the Messiah because he did not recite a song. This is not a punishment but a natural consequence. Whoever does not recite a song for a great historical event that took place in his day, testifies about himself that he does not recognize the messianic potential inherent in the event, and the great miraculous event "dissolves" and does not become the end of days: Sancheriv is not Gog and Magog, and Chizkiyahu is not the Messiah. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)