**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARASHAT HA’AZINU**

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**God As a Poet**

**By Prof. Yonatan Grossman**

**The Addressees of the Song of Ha’azinu**

To whom is the song/poem of *Ha'azinu* addressed? The obvious answer is that the Jewish nation, who heard the song, is its target audience, and it is about what would happen to them that the song was to serve as a witness. This is clear both from the content of the song and from its style, which appeals to Israel in the second person throughout its entire length.

Stylistically, however, Moshe seems to relate to other addressees at the beginning of the song: "Give ear, you heavens, and I will speak; and let the earth hear the words of my mouth" (*Devarim* 32:1). Following Rashi, many interpret this verse as a call to heaven and earth to serve as witnesses: "'Give ear, you heavens' – That I warn Israel, and be you witnesses to this matter; for so I have told them that you will be witnesses" (Rashi, ad loc.). According to Rashi, the song is addressed to Israel ("that I warn Israel"), and heaven and earth are invited to witness the matter. However, according to an even simpler reading, Moshe's appeal to heaven and earth can be understood as defining the addressees of the song. It is them that Moshe invites to hear the song, and it is also to them that he directs his words. This is the role of similar invitations at the beginning of other songs. For example, Lamech opens his song to his wives: "Ada and Tzilla, hear my voice; you wives of Lamech, hearken to my speech" (*Bereishit* 4:23). Just as Lamech addresses his words to his wives, so Moshe directs his words to his audience – heaven and earth.

A similar reading emerges from the Ibn Ezra's bold interpretation of the verse, "When I will proclaim the name of the Lord, ascribe you greatness unto our God" (v. 3). Who is asked to ascribe greatness to God when they hear Moshe's proclamation of the name of the Lord? Many understand that the verse refers to Israel, who are listening to the words of the song, as stated by R. Yehuda: "'When I will proclaim the name of the Lord, ascribe you greatness unto our God' – Moshe said to Israel: When I mention the name of the Holy One, blessed is He, you must 'ascribe greatness' to Him" (*Yoma* 37a). Indeed, it is from here that R. Abahu derives that the *zimmun* blessing of *Birkat ha-Mazon* requires three people. This is also the accepted interpretation among various commentators, such as the Rashbam (ad loc.):

When I relate to you the mighty things that the Holy One, blessed is He, did for you, and the good things that he gave you, and also that He is righteous regarding what He will do for you, you too "ascribe greatness to our God" – admit the truth.

However, despite the reasonableness of this reading, it must be noted that there has been no mention yet whatsoever of Israel in the verses. There is a more likely grammatical subject of the verb "ascribe," the directive to ascribe greatness to God, as proposed by the Ibn Ezra:

"Ascribe greatness" – This relates back to heaven and earth, as it is stated: "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows His handiwork" (*Tehillim* 19:2), as I have explained, and also: "Let heaven and earth praise Him" (*Tehillim* 69:35).

Although this interpretation may sound strange, it fits in well with a consecutive reading of the verses. According to this proposal, heaven and earth are not only witnesses; they are also included among the addressees of the song, alongside Israel. The song was proclaimed in their ears as well, and it fell upon them to internalize it.

Note that the song's conclusion surprisingly does not depict Israel, but rather "His land": "Sing aloud, O you nations, of His people; for He avenges the blood of His servants, and renders vengeance to His adversaries, and makes atonement for the land of His people" (*Devarim* 32:43). Various explanations have attempted to join "His people" to "His land" as the object of the atonement (see, for example, Rashi and Rabbeinu Bachya, ad loc.). But the simpler reading is that the land is the object of the atonement dealt with in this verse (whether the atonement shall be made by "His people," as the Ibn Ezra understands, or whether the phrase should be understood as "the land of His people," as follows from the Samaritan translation). According to this conclusion, it would seem that the main conflict that the song wishes to clarify is the defilement and atonement of the land. Whatever the reason for this conclusion, it fits with the beginning of the song, which turns the universe itself into an addressee of the song. Thus, it is reasonable that the song also describes the process that the land itself will undergo.

In what sense can the heavens and the earth be viewed as the addressees of the song? The Ibn Ezra cites the Gaon's interpretation: "I have already informed you that the Gaon said that 'heaven' refers to the angels, and 'earth' refers to the people living on the earth." According to him, the reference is not to heaven and earth themselves, but rather to those who dwell in heaven and earth, and thus it is easy to understand how they can be the addressees of the song.

It is more reasonable to understand the mention of heaven and earth in the song's opening verse as a "merismus" – a figure of speech in which two parts of a thing, perhaps contrasting or complementary parts, are made to stand for the whole. In other words, Moshe means to say that all of nature must listen, that the entire universe must hear the words of the song. What, then, is the role of heaven and earth and all of nature as addressees of the song and as those who are asked to ascribe greatness to God, to justify and confirm His ways of governance?[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Why a Song?**

The appeal to nature to listen to the song is connected to an even more fundamental question: Why formulate the ideas as a song/poem? *Parashat Ha'azinu* is written in the Torah as a poem with two columns, and it appears that the Torah itself calls this unit a "song": "Now therefore write you this song for you, and teach you it the children of Israel; put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for Me against the children of Israel" (*Devarim* 31:19). The accepted explanation is that this directive to write the "song" relates to the song of *Ha'azinu*, which will shortly be mentioned. Thus, for example, the Ramban (ad loc.) writes: "The meaning of 'this song' – the song that I will tell you now – namely, *Ha'azinu*."

We will return to the Ramban's words, but it should first be noted that others understand that the term "song" (*shira*) refers here to the entire Torah, from the beginning of *Bereishit* to this point. Thus writes R. Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenberg in his *Ha-Ketav Ve-Ha-Kabbala*:

It seems to me that the word "song" refers here not only to the song of *Ha'azinu*, but to the entire Torah from *Bereishit* to "in the sight of all Israel" (*Devarim* 34:12). In other places as well, we find that *Chazal* call the entire Torah a song… It is not surprising to call the Torah a *shira*, a term which denotes singing, whether a song that is only a melody or a song with words. Both forms are called a *shir*, the word being derived from *yashar*, that which is straight and upright… According to this true principle, it is right to call the Torah a *shira*, for the Torah in its entirety is also called "the book of *Yashar*" (*Yehoshua* 10:13); "Behold, it is written in the book of *Yashar*" (II *Shemuel* 1:18), which the Aramaic translation renders as "the book of the Torah." (*Ha-Ketav Ve-Ha-Kabbala*, *Devarim* 31:19)

According to this view, the requirement to write the "song" and to teach it to the children of Israel relates not only to *Parashat Ha'azinu*, but to the entire Torah. Although this interpretation seems forced, one point supports it. After Moshe is commanded, "Now therefore write you this song for you and teach you it the children of Israel" (*Devarim* 31:19), the Torah describes how Moshe fulfilled the command: "So Moshe wrote this song the same day and taught it the children of Israel" (v. 22), but two verses later it also says: "And it came to pass, when Moshe had made an end of writing the words of this law in a book, until they were finished" (v. 24). Scripture suddenly shifts from describing the writing of the song to describing the writing of the Torah. In this forum, we will not clarify how this writing was carried out, but according to the *Ha-Ketav Ve-Ha-Kabbala*, this can easily be explained: "This song" is nothing other than "this law"; we are dealing here with two designations of the same text that Moshe wrote.[[2]](#footnote-2)

There is room to clarify the significance of defining the entire Torah as a "song" (which according to *Ha-Ketav ve-ha-Kabbala*, is connected to a text that in itself is "upright" and which leads man to be "upright").[[3]](#footnote-3) But it is not by chance that the rest of the commentators explained the directive as relating specifically to *Parashat Ha'azinu*. The continuation of the text teaches that the directive relates specifically to the song of *Ha'azinu*, which will serve as a witness for Israel in the future when calamities will befall them:

For when I shall have brought them into the land which I swore unto their fathers, flowing with milk and honey; and they shall have eaten their fill and waxen fat; and turned unto other gods, and served them, and despised Me, and broken My covenant; then it shall come to pass, when many evils and troubles are come upon them, that this song shall testify before them as a witness; for it shall not be forgotten out of the mouths of their seed. (*Devarim* 31:20-21)

The content of these words indicates that the reference is to the song of *Ha'azinu*, which indeed describes the future history of Israel which includes the sins of the people and the calamities that will befall them as a result. It is not only the content that indicates that the command to write a song refers specifically to *Ha'azinu*. The words, "and they shall have eaten their fill and waxen fat; and turned unto other gods and served them," appear to relate to the words of the song of *Ha'azinu* itself: "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" (*Devarim* 32:15).

If we adopt the prevailing view that *Parashat Ha'azinu* is defined as a "song," the question arises: Why did God see fit to include a song in His Torah? What would have been missing had this *parasha* been written as ordinary prose, like the rest of the Torah and like the rest of Moshe's orations in the book of *Devarim*? Other sections of the covenant of the plains of Moav describe the future (e.g., *Devarim* 29:21-27), yet they show no deviation from the usual prose mode of writing.[[4]](#footnote-4)

We must, however, temper the formulation that we have adopted: "Why did God see fit to include a song in His Torah?" From the wording of the song, it stands to reason that Moshe is the speaker, for in several places he speaks about God in the third person. This is particularly applicable to the opening declaration: "When I will proclaim the name of the Lord, ascribe you greatness unto God" (*Devarim* 32:3). From here it is clear that Moshe is the speaker, and not God.[[5]](#footnote-5) But even if this is the case, the question remains, for Moshe relays the words of the song as they were relayed to him through prophecy. We are not dealing with an ordinary rebuke on the part of Moshe, the likes of which we have seen the entire length of the book of *Devarim*. The song includes a comprehensive historical description of Israel's future, and the Torah certainly means to imply that Moshe received these words from God and that he is relaying them to the people. Since we have already seen that in God's directive to Moshe this unit is defined as a song, it stands to reason that God was involved in the decision to deliver these words in the form of a song – whether it was Moshe who formulated the song in light of the prophecy that he received or whether he received these words in this form from God.

It should be noted that conventional writing in the ancient Near East tends much more to poetry than to prose. Even complex epics that express a developing plot are usually written in repetitive lines, with multiple parallels and in a distinctly poetic style. In other words, it is actually the accepted prose style of the Bible that deviates from what was customary writing in the ancient world; in the song of *Ha'azinu*, the Torah returns in a certain sense to the more common style of writing.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Why, then, is history presented through poetry?

**Music and Memory**

In the continuation of the Ramban's remarks that were quoted above, he emphasizes a central feature of song, and from it emerges his perception of why the song of *Ha'azinu* was written in this manner:

And it is called a *shira*, because Israel would always sing it as a song. And so too it was written as a song, because songs are written with breaks in accordance with the melody. (Ramban, *Devarim* 31:19)

In our modern thinking, we are used to the idea that one can write "poetry" and one can write "prose," these two modes being parallel forms of literary expression. However, the Ramban correctly writes that it would appear that in the Biblical period the difference between prose and poetry was more dramatic. Poems were also set to music and sung. This feature is so central to poetry that according to the Ramban, the rhythmic breaks in poetic writing and the short lines serve the melody. This is the way that the singers know how to sing the work in proper manner.

Elsewhere in the Bible, the term *shira* is used in reference to song. For example:

And Chizkiyahu commanded to offer the burnt-offering upon the altar. And when the burnt-offering began, the song [*shir*] of the Lord began also, and the trumpets, together with the instruments of David king of Israel. And all the congregation prostrated themselves, and the singers sang, and the trumpeters sounded; all this continued until the burnt-offering was finished. (II *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 29:26-27)

There are also musical instruments called by this very term: “That thrum on the psaltery, that devise for themselves instruments of music (*shir*), like David (*Amos* 6:5). Thus, it seems that the Ramban is fundamentally correct; and the significance of defining a particular text as a *shir* is that it was also set to music and people were invited to sing it.

What a shame that we do not have the original melody (Moshe's?) for the song of *Ha'azinu*, which would certainly reveal much of the meaning of the song and of the atmosphere that accompanies it in its various stanzas. Perhaps this is the melody of the cantillation notes according to one of the accepted traditions among the Jewish people. However, even if the melody is lost to us, the basic idea of the Ramban provides a good explanation for why this text was written as a song. Since the purpose of the song was to serve as a witness for the people of Israel, God commands Moshe to "put" the song in their mouths: "Now therefore write you this song for you, and teach you it the children of Israel; put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for Me against the children of Israel" (*Devarim* 31:19). Without a doubt, it is easier to remember by heart a poem that is set to music than it is to remember prose, and since the role of the song was to be put in the mouths of Israel, the form of a song is the best option to achieve this.

This is the most common approach among the commentators. It suffices to mention the words of the Tzfat Kabbalist R. Mordechai Ha-Cohen in his commentary on the *parasha*:

He calls it a *shira* to say that it should be fluent in their mouths – that is, the song of *Ha'azinu…* “Now therefore write you this song for you, and teach you it the children of Israel; put it in their mouths” – it is not enough to study it, but rather it must be fluent in their mouths like a song that is fluent in a person's mouth, and he constantly sings it. (*Siftei Kohen*, *Devarim* 31:19)

If we accept this approach, we have here a sort of a command to set the song of *Ha'azinu* to music even today, because the main purpose of the melody is to help us memorize the song; if the original melody was lost, it is appropriate to replace it with another simple and catchy melody. In fact, this reasoning is valid even according to those who maintain that the song of *Ha'azinu* was not set to music. It is easier to remember a poem written in rhythmic and parallel lines than rolling prose with a developing plot.

**Determinism**

It would be possible to suffice with this explanation, but I wish to cautiously suggest another reason for writing the song of *Ha'azinu* in the form of a song. In contrast to the general atmosphere that Moshe emphasized throughout his oration, and especially in this oration concerning the covenant, which highlighted the free choice given to Israel and its impact on the reward that is due them,[[7]](#footnote-7) *Parashat Ha'azinu* presents a historical model that is to take place in the future, and the wording implies that the speaker is certain that it will indeed take place. At first glance there seems to be a contradiction: Does Jewish history stem from the Jewish people's free choice, or does it follow a predetermined master plan that imposes its realization on reality, a kind of planned procession of ideas that is realized at a pace that is appropriate for it?

It is possible that the underlying assumption of the song is that the nature of man will cause him to wax fat from the great abundance and then deny the goodness that he had received from God. The choice is indeed in his hands, but even if there are generations who will fulfill their part of the covenant, in the end, a generation will arrive that will deny God's goodness and break the covenant.[[8]](#footnote-8)

If we are dealing here with Israel's future, is it possible to point to the specific period described in the song? Various suggestions have been proposed in this regard, but it is possible that the song does not describe a concrete historical occurrence, but rather a model that is liable to repeat itself over and over again (like the cycle that we find in the book of *Shofetim*). This also explains why the song is so vague about the historical situation it sees before its eyes – there is no mention of the Temple, for example – and why there is no explicit mention of exile (in contrast to the view of the Ramban), and especially why there is no mention of the future redemption. If we have before us a full history of the Jewish people, how is it possible that it ends with God's revenge against the cruel nation that subjugated Israel, and not with the people of Israel sitting securely in their land? This is not the way we would expect a song describing the apocalypse to end.

A similar idea was suggested by R. Prof. Dov Rappel:

The song of *Ha'azinu* is skimpy on facts because it is not a prophecy. It presents a general schema of the history of Israel. Jewish history is comprised of cycles, different from each other in their details, but similar in their general formula… It shows us the general structure of our history. (*Shirat Ha'azinu im Mavo U-Feirush* [Tel Aviv, 1996], p. 12)

We cannot enter here into a comprehensive discussion of this thesis, and it may be that it should be adopted in a more moderate formulation: The song describes the upcoming history of Israel after the people have settled in their land (the period of the *Shofetim*, with certain changes), but it turns this specific history into a prototype that represents a broad and fundamental historical theme. An echo of this concept can be found in a verse that best indicates the extent to which the song avoids referring to a specific period: "They have roused Me to jealousy with a no-god; they have provoked Me with their vanities; and I will rouse them to jealousy with a no-people; I will provoke them with a vile nation" (*Devarim* 32:21). Who is the nation that will subjugate Israel? Rashi suggests two possible identifications of the nation known here as "a no-people":

"With a no-people” – a nation that has no name, i.e., with a nation that has no reputation, as it states, e.g., of the Kasdim: “Behold, the land of the Kasdim, this people was not” (*Yeshayahu* 23:13); and of Esav it states: “You are greatly despicable” (*Ovadya* 1:2). (Rashi, ad loc., according to the *Keter* ed.)

Rashi does not appear to question which nation the verse is referring to, whether it is the Kasdim-Babylonians or Esav-Edom; rather, he brings two nations that vexed Israel during the First and Second Temple periods. As the Ramban adds (ad loc.), "This is an allusion to the two exiles." Just as the verse can be referring to the Kasdim and to Esav, so too it can be referring to other nations who fulfilled the prophecy of the verse. As R. Yosef Bekhor Shor formulates the matter when he relates to this exegetical tradition:

Our Rabbis explained: Such as the Kasdim, about whom it is written: “This people was not.” “I will provoke them with a vile nation” – such as the people of Barabaria and Marotania, who walk about naked in the marketplace, as there is no one as despicable and abominable before the Holy One, blessed be He, as one who walks about naked in the marketplace. And they oppress Israel. And such as the Christians. (commentary to *Devarim* 32:21)

In other words, the song remained open to various implementations, and indeed it was implemented time and time again. Similarly, when *Chazal* identified the nation that is a no-people with the Kasdim, this was merely an example, "such as."

Whether we adopt Dov Rappel's formulation or another formulation, the song does indeed present an open outline of the future, which includes sin, punishment, and God's future vengeance against the nations for the desecration of His name caused by the shameful state of Israel whose name is associated with His name (and not because of the people's repentance!). In this respect, some might argue that what we have here is a deterministic historical model.

In light of this, it is possible to offer a new explanation as to why this passage is written as a song. The regular rhythm of the song, its internal rhythm and the external rhythm that follows from the melody, are especially suited to content that repeats itself. Prose is especially adapted to a one-time event, in which the characters described therein enjoy freedom of action, in accordance with which the plot advances. A historical theme or a historical model, which seeks to reveal repetitive behavior that accords with natural cyclicity, is more aptly expressed through the language of poetry.

In this light, we can return once again to the beginning of the song. What is the significance of presenting "nature" as an addressee of the song? The appeal to heaven and earth contributes to the feeling that the song is not presenting a one-time occurrence, but rather presents a permanent historical model that goes beyond a concrete period and represents the ways of God's governance and the history of His people. The things that are described in the song will occur again and again, as a natural model that psychologists and sociologists may know how to decipher. Precisely because the history of the Jewish people is presented in the song as a recurring natural phenomenon, the appropriate addressee is "nature." In other words, the people of Israel, which along the length of the song become its trivial addressees, become integrated with heaven and earth, with the entire universe, all of which is governed according to fixed models.

As I alluded above, it is possible that the essence of the song is not deterministic, but it presents what is likely to occur, and this probability reflects a spiritual law of nature, according to which God rewards His people in accordance with their actions. It therefore falls upon them to proclaim this song day and night and justify God's deeds. "The Rock, His work is perfect; for all His ways are justice; a God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and right is He" (v. 4).

Translated by David Strauss

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1. In a comprehensive study that Stauder dedicated to Mesopotamian poetry, he argues that Mesopotamian poetry never gives expression to the personal-spiritual life of the author, but rather is exclusively limited to ritual; it serves as odes of praise to the wonders of god and alongside the offering of sacrifices (Wilhelm Stauder, "*Die Musik der Sumarer, Babylonier und Assyrier*," *Orientalische Musik, Handbuch der Orientalistik*, 1 (1970), pp. 171-243). The reading that is integrated also in the song of *Ha'azinu*, to ascribe praise and greatness to God, accords with this claim. The testimony provided by the song is not only one of "I told you so." Rather, it brings the addressees of the song to justify and praise God. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Modern research has offered several ways to explain this doubling, but some have adopted a similar approach: The song becomes part of the Torah, so that it is possible to refer to it by that same name (see Kleer, "šîr," *TDOT*, vol. 14, pp. 639-640). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Since the word "*shira*" is found also in other Semitic languages, it is difficult to assume that the word is connected etymologically to the word "*yashar*." Nevertheless, it is possible that this is a play on words based on their similarity in sound, as in the appeal to the righteous to sing to God: "Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous, praise is comely for the upright [*yashar*]… Sing [*shiru*] praises unto Him with the psaltery of ten strings" (*Tehillim* 33:1-3). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The definition of "song/poem" is complicated – certainly in modern poetry, but also in ancient poetry (see, for example, Yaakov Kaduri, *"Shirat Ha-Mikra –Ha Keitzad*?" in *Sifrut ha-Mikra*: *Mevo'ot U-Mechkarim*, I, pp. 287ff.). Parallelism is commonly seen as the defining feature of Biblical poetry, but it is more precise to say that writing in two columns is what characterizes Biblical poetry – whether the relationship between the two clauses is one of parallelism (as is usually the case) or not. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For more on this point, see R. Samet's *shiur* on *Parashat Ha'azinu* (second series). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This also affects the tenses of the verbs. In the Bible there is a past tense that is appropriate for prose, whereas "the Ugaritic epic and myth, which is formulated entirely in the form of parallelism characteristic of ancient Semitic poetry, is related in present-future tense, without chronological context" (A. Greenstein, *Ha-Sifrut Ha-Ugaritit*," in *Sifrut Ha-Mikra*: *Mevo'ot U-Mechkarim*, II, p. 498). In the song of *Ha'azinu* – despite its being a poem – we find also verbs in past tense ("But Yeshurun waxed fat and kicked" [v. 15)), but its primary style certainly accords with what is stated above. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Some have even argued that the verses describing the covenant in the plains of Moav present the idea of free will "with exceptional clarity and acuity, and it (the following unit in *Devarim* 30) is the primary source for the idea of free will in the Torah, and perhaps in all of the Bible" (D. Cohen-Tzemach, *Devarim*, *Olam Ha-Tanakh*, p. 224). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Some have proposed a similar reading regarding Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden. We also should not reject the reading according to which the song should be understood also as a threat. If indeed Israel will sin, this will be their fate, but it is in their hands not to sin and to be spared from the calamities described in the song. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)