

Musings on Parshas Ha'azinu—2020

Overview

- Moshe's Farewell Song/Poem:
 - Appeal to universe for attention
 - God's Faithfulness
 - Israel's folly
 - The lesson of History
 - Israel's ingratitude
 - Israel deserves punishment
 - God delays His vengeance
 - Israel's enemies will be punished
 - Nations of world called upon to rejoice in Israel's deliverance
- Observance of Torah law is Israel's life
- Moshe told to ascend Mt. Nevo to view Land from afar and then prepare to be "*gathered up to your people*" (i.e., die)

Torah as Poetry

Poetry (from the ancient Greek word "to create") is an art of rhythmical composition that through meaning, sound, and rhythmic language evokes pleasure and emotions by beautiful, imaginative, or elevated images. Poetry uses forms and conventions to suggest differing interpretations, or to evoke emotive responses...

- ❖ Assonance, alliteration, onomatopoeia and rhythm to achieve ***musical*** effects
- ❖ Ambiguity, symbolism, irony to ***create multiple interpretations***
- ❖ Metaphor and simile to create a layering of meanings, ***forming connections previously not perceived.***

SHADAL points out that the use of unusual and unused words, particularly those of ancient and remote origin, "*for their lack of currency of wear and tear, adds to their tonic effect and charming appeal*".

RABBI NAFTALI ZVI YEHUDA BERLIN ("NETZIV," 1816-1893), dean of the eminent Volozhin yeshiva and author of *Ha'amek Davar* (*A Matter Profound*) thinks that the Torah possesses "*both the nature and singularity of poetry[shira], which is to speak in lyrical language*". Because the essential quality of poetry is its compressed nature and its allusiveness--a kind of symbolic language -- **the so-called hidden meaning of the Biblical text is its real meaning!**

"Therefore, write down this '*shira*' and teach it to the people... in order that this '*shira*' may be My witness against the Nation, when I bring them into the Land.... For I know the very nature of this people (the way they will act) even before I bring them into the Land..." This verse, found towards the end of last week's Parsha, is thought by some to introduce "Moshe's Farewell Shira/Poem" in this week's Parsha and by others to refer to the entire Torah.

RABBI GUNTHER PLAUT characterizes this *shira* as a hymn of hope: "*The poem warns; it instructs; it gives hope.... Rebellion against His law may put Israel in dire straits, but in the end God will be show not to have forgotten the people He had created.*"

Moshe's Farewell Shira: Form and Content

The Song provides the reader with a bird's eye view of our past as well as warnings of what will happen to us in the future.

RAMBAN summarizes as follows: The Torah predicts that despite all the goodness bestowed on us, we will turn to idolatry, thereby invoking God's anger and prompting Him to expel us from our land. Eventually, He will inflict His vengeance on our enemies for persecuting us. **Their deep hatred of us is based on our loyalty to God, our obeying Him and His Torah; not intermarrying; disdaining and banishing their religious ritual and cults. They maltreat us because they hate God and the ethics He represents.** Our ultimate redemption at the end of history will come when God forgives us for our sins and repays our enemies "*for His name's sake*" because we will have repented. But even if we have not repented and remain undeserving, He still promises us redemption. "*Divine judgment on Israel is therefore annulled for fear of desecrating the name of God*" (NECHAMA LEIBOWITZ).

RABBI LUDWIG ROSENTHAL, (German rabbi, 1886-1929, cited by both RAV JACOBSON and NECHAMA LEIBOWITZ) provides a **tripartite division of the body of the Song, introduced by a three-verse prologue and followed by a four-verse epilogue in which the latter harkens back to the former.**

- ❖ The prologue “Give ear, heavens”; the epilogue: “I raise My hand to heaven”.
- ❖ An invitation for the listener to participate in the prologue is worded “Give glory to our God” and in the epilogue, “O nations acclaim His people”.
- ❖ In this preface Moshe exhorts the nation to respond, “*praise to God*” whenever he mentions God’s name. [Note: This is the basis for the custom of saying “*Baruch Hu u-varuch shmo*” whenever we hear God’s name mentioned in a blessing.]

The body of the Song consists of 36 verses divided into three equal and distinct stanzas of 12 verses each...

- ❖ The first section details **God’s loving-kindness to us**, and how He transported us on the wings of eagles from a howling, waste wilderness to a fertile land of oil, wheat, and wine.

The verses deal with who is to blame for the nation’s sins. It cannot be God because “*The Rock [i.e., God]—His ways are perfect, all His ways are just... [Do you attribute] injustice to Him. No! It is His children’s fault... For He is your father who created you*” (and would not cause you harm, unless there was a purpose).

God reminds us of our history from the time of Creation and how He divided up the nations and selected the nation of Israel to represent Him among the nations of the world, “*For God’s portion is His people.*”

God attended to the nation’s needs, preparing them to settle in the land of Israel. “*He found them in a desert land, a desolate, howling*

wasteland...He encompassed them...He protected them...He guided them with compassion like an eagle that wakens its nest gently, hovering over its young it spreads its wings taking them, carrying them safely on its upper side”.

But in the future when the nation reaches the Promised Land and experiences prosperity and affluence it will turn to idolatry and sin “...*Jeshurun* [i.e., the nation of Israel] *waxed-fat and rebelled, you grew fat, rotund and obese, (you) forsook the God Who made them and disgraced the Rock of their salvation”.*

- ❖ The second section **describes our ingratitude and predicts the ensuing terrible punishment we will endure:** “*I will hide My face from them...for they are a treacherous breed, children with no loyalty...the sword shall deal death without, as shall the terror within”.*
- ❖ The third section of the Song focuses on **how God mercifully deviates from the path of strict justice and comes to the aid of His nation** even when they do not deserve it. His reasons for saving us are our enemies’ arrogance and “*for His name’s sake”.*

This Song guarantees the continuity of the Jewish people

Furthermore, explains RABBI LEIBTAG, its importance is as “*an eternal cry not only for Teshuva, but also for the recognition of our purpose*” -- to be a living example to the world by leading an ethical, moral Torah life. “*The time will ultimately come, should we perform proper teshuva, when a new song will be sung [“v'nomar l'fanav SHIRA CHADASHA...”], a song of praise and recognition of God as the source of our victory.*”

Through a review of Israel’s history expressed in poetic wording and imagery some of which link to the Creation, RABBI FOHRMAN shows that it is God who is responsible for our language, our culture, our history...our very existence. The poem re-enforces God’s role as our Creator, our Father and Our Mother (“*suckling honey*”) who ***would certainly never pull back from us unless we had pulled away from Him first.***

RABBI SACKS explains that for leaders to have an impact it is not enough for them to appeal to a person's intellect. **To reach a person's heart, to influence a person's life, they need to speak to feelings.** It is for this reason that as his life is ending, Moshe, the great prophet and teacher, turns to poetry. *"The man of intellect and moral courage becomes the figure of emotional intelligence, allowing himself to be, in Judah Halevi's lovely image, the harp for God's song."*

RABBI LEIBTAG on the Five Songs in Tanach

The following table summarizes these five songs and the important period that each one concludes:

WHERE FOUND	NAME OF POEM	WHEN	OUTCOME	FORMAT
Shmos15:1-19	Shirat Ha'Yam	after <i>the Exodus</i>	Total independence from Egypt	Brickwork-like
Devarim 32:1-43	Shirat Ha'azinu	after 40- year desert trek	Prediction that the Israelites would sin at some point after entering the land	Two columns
Yehoshua 12:1-24	Shirat Yehoshua	after defeat of the 31 kings	Only Yehudah and Yosef conquered their land. The other ten had not yet.	Two columns
Shoftim 5:1-31	Shirat Devorah	after complete conquest of north	Geographically unification of the twelve tribes	Brickwork-like
Shmuel II 22:1-51	Shirat David	after establishing the Monarchy	King David creates a stable monarchy with secure borders	Brickwork-like

of their original expectations but the songs following the brickwork-like pattern were used when expectations were fully realized.

TWO COLUMNS

- SHIRAT HA'AZINU -The people of the Exodus were destined to reach the Holy Land. But they and their offspring continuously angered God. What should have been an *ideal* situation --conquering the promised Land with Moshe as their leader--became a *more realistic* one with a pessimistic forecast that the Israelites would sin after entering the land. It seemed inevitable that the nation will fail in its Divine mission of establishing God's model nation in the Land of Israel. Such a tragic conclusion necessitated the use of the first pattern for *Ha'azinu*.
- Yehoshua's *conquest was far from complete* because only the Tribes of Yehudah and Yosef successfully conquered their lands. But the remaining ten tribes had *not* captured their respective areas. YEHOSHUA'S SHIRA, therefore, is written utilizing the first pattern.

BRICKWORK-LIKE

- SHIRAT HA'YAM marks not only the completion of the Exodus, but also our ***total independence from Egypt***.
- During the time of Devorah, Emek Yizrael (the Jezreel Valley), which sat on the major trade route from Egypt to Mesopotamia, was finally conquered through the joint effort of the surrounding tribes. Barak and Devorah defeated Israel's enemies in the north, thereby geographically uniting the twelve tribes. Therefore, SHIRAT DEVORAH utilizes the second pattern.
- Emek Yizrael, having been lost during the time of Judges, came back under control during King David's time. David expanded his sphere of occupation to the north, east, and south, thus creating a *stable monarchy and secure borders*. He thanks God for His

assistance in achieving the most complete conquest of Eretz Canaan in SHIRAT DAVID.

Life Lessons

“Remember the days of old; think about the years of the past generations. Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders and they will explain to you.” RABBI MARC ANGEL sees in this verse a set of guidelines for life:

- *“Remember the days of old”* refers to rooting ourselves in traditions and teachings to maintain our continuity with our past.
- *“Ask your father”* refers to the prophets. Though we currently lack living prophets, we have the words and messages of past prophets as recorded in the Torah.
- *“Your elders”* refers to our sages who historically have had the wisdom to apply ancient teachings to our present-day needs. Too, notes RABBI ANGEL, they are the ones *“most tuned in to the coming generations of the Jewish people, the most concerned about a messianic future”*.

RABBI ANGEL concludes that it is our success in balancing these diverse religious approaches--maintaining things as they've always been vs longing for the good old days vs longing for the messianic era--that will mold our future.

The Torah opens with a tale of the first humans who were driven from paradise when they failed to take responsibility for their actions. Adam blames Eve who in turn places the blame on the serpent. RABBI SACKS draws our attention to the message in this week's penultimate parsha that ***in Judaism we are called upon to accept responsibility for our behavior.***

Humanity has experienced for the most part “a flight from responsibility”: Blaming God when things go wrong; blaming our sense of victimhood on other people, on the media, on politicians, and our parents; and shirking moral responsibility with the feeble excuse that we were only obeying our

superiors' orders. Moshe's farewell song to his people is that God's laws are for our benefit, not His.

The Song's message is that **when things go wrong don't blame Him but look within**. Unlike some other religions, Judaism does not view humans as corrupt, tainted by "original sin". On the contrary, we are made in God's image and granted free will and freedom-- and the accompanying responsibility for our choices. (RABBI SACKS)

Moshe's Failure to Sanctify God's Name

God informs Moshe that he will die and not enter the land of Canaan "*because you broke faith with me amid the Israelites at the Waters of Dispute at Kadesh in the Tzin desert, and because you did not sanctify me among the Israelites*".

The Israelites had complained about a lack of water. Moshe and Aaron **fled** to the *Ohel Moed* and "fell on their faces" (to pray? to appease the demonstrators? in frustration and disgust?)

God told Moshe to "*take THE rod (to assemble the nation?) ... and speak to the rock before their eyes... and you shall bring out water from the rock*". Moshe took the rod (the same? another one?) and spoke harshly to the assembling nation: "*listen here you rebels, can we bring out water from the rock?*" An enraged Moshe raised his hand (holding the rod), hit the rock twice and abundant waters come out to quench the thirst of the congregation and their cattle.

God's response: "*Because you did not believe in Me (alternate translation: were not supportive enough of me) to sanctify me in the eyes of the Children of Israel therefore you shall not bring this congregation into the land I have given them. These are the waters of Meriva...where He was sanctified in them.*"

Clearly, Moshe did something seriously wrong to deserve such a harsh punishment. But the Torah does not tell us what it was! NECHAMA LEIBOWITZ surveys commentators' views...

- **RASHI**, later followed by **SHADAL**, writes that Moshe **hit** the rock instead of talking to it. Had he spoken to the rock as instructed, the people would have reasoned that if even an inanimate rock performs the will of God, how much more so we humans are obligated to follow His commandments!
- **RAMBAN** focuses on the “shall **we**...?” in which Moshe seems to give part of the credit to himself and to Aharon instead of attributing the water-extraction to God alone.
- **IBN EZRA** faults the two leaders for their undignified, unstatesman-like reaction to the nation’s demand for water (fleeing and falling on their faces)—and for the unnecessary hitting of the rock **twice**. The leaders displayed a lack of respect for the people and their need for water.
- **SAADIA GAON** understands the phrase “*talk to the rock*” to mean “talk to **them** (the Israelites) ...**near** the rock ...” **about** God’s ability to miraculously extract water from a stone. Instead, Moshe berates them and strikes the rock twice.
- **HA’KETAV V’HAKABALLAH** focuses on God’s command to speak to the rock L’EYNEHEM, “*before their eyes*”. Since sounds and speech are absorbed by ears, not eyes, it must mean that God was not referring to the *physical eye* but rather to the *mind’s eye*. Not physical sight but **Insight**. Moshe’s failure was in wasting the opportunity to help the nation “see” (understand) the enormous capability of God.
- **RAMBAM** draws our attention to the tone of Moshe’s pejorative description of the people: “*listen here YOU REBELS*” (or “fools” or “teachers” who presume to teach leaders). The people looked up to their leader and emulated his behavior. But instead of being patient, Moshe became angry and exasperated. For a man in his position such public behavior amounted to a desecration of God’s name.
- **JOSEPH ALBO** believes that God subjects Nature to the control of believers. In the Korach incident, Moshe took the initiative to announce that the “earth would open its mouth”—and God complied. In response to the demand for water, Moshe and Aharon should have taken the initiative to announce that a rock would split and water would flow. They should have confronted and assured the people that God will provide. Instead, they acted cowardly, became panic-stricken, fled from the people and fell on their faces praying for God to provide a solution.

- Others, finding no serious wrongdoing in this incident, conclude that the punishment was for earlier sins, possibly of the Golden Calf (Aharon) and The Spies (Moshe) which the Torah chose to keep hidden (perhaps to avoid publicly embarrassing them).
- *DAAS MIKRAH* maintains that the main takeaway from this incident is that even the giant figures of any generation sin and are punished accordingly. The particulars are secondary.

RABBI LEIBTAG, noting that the stated punishment is “... *you shall NOT LEAD this nation into the land...*” concludes that they were **punished for their failure as leaders (not as individuals)—and, therefore, could not LEAD the people there.** “*Lo he-eman-tem be*” could mean “*you did not believe in me*” but here is to be understood as meaning that they failed to **support** God (i.e., failed to defend God and to assure and encourage the nation). As a leader, Moshe should have been empathic to their needs, and not get angry at them. This breakdown in leadership had started some time earlier. They failed to sanctify God’s name several times during the forty-year desert trek but this was the final straw.

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