

The Spiritual Dangers of Complacency

Ha'azinu 5783

I.

The Song of Ha'azinu, which serves as a kind of an epilogue to the Torah, offers a brief primer on all of Jewish history. It details the Divine blessings which were bestowed upon the Jewish people in the early stages of our national relationship with the Almighty. It continues on to discuss the pathology of complacency which we developed in those years of plenty, and the degree to which that complacency undermined our relationship with our Father in heaven, resulting in Divine withdrawal (*hester panim*) and terrible national suffering. Finally, the song concludes with Divine vengeance upon the enemies of the Jewish people, and the restoration of our collective relationship with God.

For good reason, Ramban referred to the *shira* as a “shtar edut”, literally, a testimonial document which encoded the entire history of our people to his era. Ramban, in one of the most audacious passages in his entire commentary on the Torah, comments that the accuracy of this song is such that we ought to have believed in it even if it had not been Divinely ordained, the work of a mere mortal, and, all the more so, in light of its Divine origins.

The trajectory outlined in Ha'azinu highlights the degree to which complacency borne of material abundance constitutes an existential spiritual threat. *VaYishman Yeshurun Va-Yivat*, sadly, connotes a kind of spiritual lethargy and corpulence which occludes religious life as cholesterol does to vasculature.

In fact, much of Sefer Devarim warns against this phenomenon, in which we take credit for our success, and forget that God is our ultimate protector and provider. In perhaps its most infamous manifestation, Parashat Eikev excoriates the one who comes to the Promised Land, enjoys the bounty, and smugly and promptly engages in self-congratulation, *kochi v'otzem yadi asah li at ha-chayil ha'zeh*, which is as wrongheaded as it is repugnant.

For Ramban, forgetting the Almighty, *shikhchat Hashem*, is the first of all prohibitions in the Torah, preceding idolatry. It reflects, when viewed against the backdrop of Ha'azinu, and the historical trajectory of the Jewish people, beginning with the most humble of origins in slavery and bondage, an almost shocking level of ingratitude. As such, the more one has fulfilled the mandate of cultivating a proper sense of historical consciousness, *zechor yemot olam binu shenot dor va'dor*, the more egregious the absence of *hakarot ha-tov* becomes. Indeed, for Ramban, this is the plain meaning of the word “*naval*”, repeated in various conjugations throughout the song.

Even for Rashi, we would do well to remember that his understanding of the enigmatic verse explaining the curses of the tokhakha, *tachat asher lo avadta et Hashem Elokekha b'Simcha u'vi'tuv levav me'rov kol*, strikes a similar note- *b'od she'hayah licha rov kol*, for you did not serve the Lord your G-d when you had plenty. Rashi's understanding is that the failure to serve the Almighty when material blessings were abundant is the proximate cause for the removal of those blessings themselves.

II.

It is fair to say, in light of the threat described in Ha'azinu, that halakha approached the material world with a circumspect, and indeed, dialectical attitude. On the one hand, there is a clear appreciation of Divine bounty and blessing, which itself presents both a spiritual mandate and opportunity to exalt and acknowledge the Almighty, '*v'achalta v'savata u'verachta et Hashem elokecha al ha'aretz ha-Tova asher natan lach*.'

Still more ambitious is the coda to the Yerushalmi in Kiddushin, which asserts a kind of spiritual imperative on deriving benefit, and presumably, developing a sense of greater awareness and appreciation of the Divine physical world. Of course, on a monthly basis, we do unabashedly pray for a life of comfort and dignity, *chaim shel osher v'kavod*. We do not romanticize grinding poverty, as some have mistakenly assumed, nor are we unaware of its challenges, the proverbial *tzaratan shel talmidei chachamim*.

And yet, there is more than a trifle of ambivalence here. It is not merely the concern for *redifat ha'mammon*, or in parallel, *redifat ha'ma'achalot*, materialism and hedonism, respectively, which gave Rambam such cause for consternation; nor is it merely the concern of mistaken priorities and entrapment, *ohen kesef lo yisba kesef*; nor is it the simple question of limited time and energy, *marbeh nechasim*, *marbeh de'agab*.

While all of these certainly represented significant concerns, it seems, certainly from the perspective of Shirat Ha'azinu, that the gravest threat of all is complacency borne of self-congratulation for success. These feelings, so spiritually corrosive, are simply incompatible with spiritual life per se.

III.

The result of such narcissism, of course, is catastrophic.

When we violate, out of a sense of complacency borne of plenty, the injunction against forgetting the Almighty who sustains us, *tzur yeladikha teshi va'tishkach kel mecholilekha*, the immediate result is, as it were, enraging the Almighty, and bringing upon ourselves the full measure of His wrath, *va-yar Hashem va-yinatx*.

At that point, when tragedy strikes, we beseech him for help, and wonder why He is allowing unpleasant events to transpire in our lives.

Shirat Ha'azinu assures us that God, if only for His own name's sake, will hear us even then, when we cry for Him out of distress. At that point, the Almighty, who will reveal Himself in the form of *kel nakamot Hashem*, will exact justice upon those who have persecuted and oppressed His people.

Yet, despite the aversion of total annihilation, and the ultimate vindication with respect to our enemies, one cannot help but be struck by Moshe's attempt to warn the Jewish people regarding the costs of entering this terribly unhealthy vortex of spiritual complacency in times of plenty, followed by suffering and moments of intensive spiritual crisis.

Sadly, the Jewish people were not able to fully take heed of this warning, as anyone who has ever engaged in an even cursory reading of *Sefer Shoftim* can attest. This kind of existence, one of spiritual extremes and whiplash, is a failure, whether individually or nationally, insofar as it betrays the inability to cultivate a life of sustained awareness of the Almighty, characterized by grounding and balance in our service of the Almighty. The oscillating national trajectory which *Ha'azinu* describes is a far cry from the mature and consistent *Avodat Hashem* we are meant to cultivate.

By contrast, the idyllic imagery of the Psalmist in describing the righteous as a tree thriving upon still waters, regarding whom the Rabbis' averred that 'his roots were more numerous than his branches', connoting a sense of spiritual balast and stability, irrespective of inevitable challenge- 'even if all of the winds in the world were to come, he would not budge'- remains, for us, the lodestar of spiritual existence.

When the Sages observed that Chabakuk had distilled the entirety of the six hundred thirteen mitzvot of the Torah into three words when he uttered, *v'tzadik be'emunato yichyeh*, the righteous man shall live by His faith, it was this very notion of constancy and consistency that they had in mind.