

## D'var Torah: Ha'azinu

9/18/21

Shabbat Shalom.

Recently Rabbi Rosenbaum pointed out—and I hope I'm not misquoting too badly—that religion is not always too helpful in explaining why bad things happen. But let's face it: today's Parasha attempts to do just that. At the end of the saga of the Torah, Moshe foresees what will become of the people he has led through the desert for forty years. He foresees that the people of Israel will meet with disaster, and warns them ahead of time that the disaster will be God's punishment for their disobedience.

I don't really find comfort in this explanation, but I would at least like to understand what the text is trying to express. Ha'azinu is filled with poetic images, subtle logic, and confusing references, and it seems to me to be one of the Torah's most difficult sections to get a handle on. With the help, mainly, of the Jewish Study Bible, I've tried to make at least some sense of this powerful text.

As we read last week in Vayelech, God tells Moshe that he must soon die, that the people of Israel will then go astray and worship other gods, and that they will face harsh punishment for their betrayal of the God of Israel. As evidence of the prediction, Moses must teach the people a poem that will one day explain to them why misfortune has befallen them.

Today we have heard that poem with its stern prediction of disaster followed by a ray of hope.

Bernard M. Levinson, who wrote the commentary to the Book of Deuteronomy in the Jewish Study Bible, describes the poem as a literary form based on the idea of a lawsuit in the heavenly court, where God accuses the people Israel of disloyalty.

Levinson outlines the phases of the trial, and I'll try to follow his outline roughly in seven parts: Summoning the witnesses, the Charge, the Circumstances, the Indictment, the Deliberation, the Verdict, and the Conclusion.

### **Part 1 (Deut. 32:1–3): Summoning of the witnesses**

— *Etz Hayim* page 1185

As we read in last week's portion, the heavens and the earth are the witnesses who will testify against Israel, and here we read:

<sup>1</sup> Give ear, O heavens, let me speak;  
Let the earth hear the words I utter!

But heaven and earth are not just witnesses. Rashi alludes to the passage in Shof'tim that says:

A person shall be put to death only on the testimony of two or more witnesses... Let the hands of the witnesses be the first against him to put him to death ... [Deut. 17:6–7]

And applying that passage to this week's portion, Rashi teaches that the heavens and the earth will not only testify against the people of Israel, but will be the instruments of reward or punishment. If Israel is found worthy, the heavens will reward Israel with dew and showers so the earth will yield its fruit. If Israel is found guilty, the heavens will withhold the rains, and the earth will not yield its produce, bringing calamity to Israel.

### **Part 2 (verses 4–6): The charge: Israel's disloyalty to the true God**

The poem asserts first that God is just:

<sup>4</sup> The Rock!—His deeds are perfect,  
Yea, all His ways are just;  
A faithful God, never false,  
True and upright is He.

In contrast, the people of Israel are

<sup>5</sup> Children unworthy of Him —  
That crooked, perverse generation —  
Their baseness has played Him false.

**Part 3 (verses 7–14): The circumstances: God’s loving actions on Israel’s behalf** — page 1186

The poem goes back to the origin of the people Israel, when God chose Jacob as “His own allotment.” Our commentary in Etz Hayim says this alludes to an ancient image of “a ruler who governs the capital or heartland of the realm personally and assigns the provinces to subordinates.” In that sense, God chose Israel as his own people.

The poem goes on to relate how God found the people Israel in <sup>10</sup> “an empty howling waste” — referring to the Sinai desert — and carried them on eagle’s wings to the <sup>13</sup> “highlands” of the Promised Land, where they would “feast on the yield of the earth.”

How then can the people of Israel be disloyal to God?

**Part 4 (verses 15–18): The indictment of Israel as disloyal** — page 1188

The poem tells us that Jeshurun — a poetic name for Israel — was like an unruly animal that “grew fat and kicked”; and that Israel

<sup>15</sup> ... forsook the God who make him  
And spurned the Rock of his support.

... and that the people of Israel

<sup>16</sup> ... incensed Him with alien things,  
...  
<sup>17</sup> They sacrificed to demons, no-gods,  
Gods they had never known...  
...  
<sup>18</sup> You neglected the Rock that begot you,  
Forgot the God who brought you forth.

As Levinson points out, the image of God as a mother giving birth to a child “only increases the injustice of Israel’s forgetting its divine parent.”

**Part 5 (verses 19–35): The deliberation** — page 1189

And here I find it difficult to grasp the logic, but the basic question seems to be: What punishment is fitting for the nation that forsook God?

God seems to consider various punishments, beginning with, perhaps, the worst of all:

<sup>20</sup> ... I will hide My countenance from them,  
And see how they fare in the end.

This is measure for measure: the people of Israel “neglected” and “forgot” God; and God will forget and neglect them. Like a parent disowning a child, this may be the cruelest form of punishment.

But God does not seem capable of abandoning the people Israel and instead contemplates fierce punishment at the hands of their enemies. What follows is a catalog of horrors that must have been familiar to those who witnessed the destruction of the Northern Kingdom by the Assyrians and by those who lived through the siege and destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians:

<sup>23</sup> I will sweep misfortunes on them,  
Use up my arrows on them;  
<sup>24</sup> Wasting famine, ravaging plague,  
Deadly pestilence, and fanged beasts  
Will I let loose against them ...  
<sup>25</sup> The sword shall deal death without,  
As shall the terror within,  
To youth and maiden alike,  
The suckling as well as the aged.

This catalog of horrors is familiar, too, to those Jews who suffered through the Crusades, the pogroms, the Holocaust. It is a punishment only too real in our history.

And yet God cannot allow the complete destruction of the people of Israel, which would give complete victory to their enemies:

<sup>26</sup> I might have reduced them to naught,  
Made their memory cease among men,  
<sup>27</sup> But for fear of the taunts of the foe,  
Their enemies who might misjudge  
And say, "Our own hand has prevailed..."

So there must be a limit to Israel's punishment, and in the end Israel's enemies must receive punishment themselves:

<sup>35</sup> .. Yea, their day of disaster is near,  
And destiny rushes upon them.

**Part 6 (verses 36–38): The verdict** — *page 1191*

And here we have a difficulty in translation. Of course there are many difficulties, but this one really challenges our understanding of the "verdict" itself.

In the JPS translation, which we have in Etz Hayim, we read:

<sup>36</sup> For Adonai will vindicate His people  
And take revenge for His servants,  
When He sees that their might is gone,  
And neither bond nor free is left.

This translation renders the Hebrew text כִּי־יִדִין ה' עִמּוֹ as "For Adonai will vindicate His people," meaning that are not guilty, and God will punish our enemies instead.

But Rashi renders the text as "When God has carried out judgment against his people," meaning that Israel is indeed guilty, and must be punished, but afterwards they will be forgiven.

Rashi points out that, up to this point, the poem has warned the people of Israel of the punishments to come upon them, so they will realize that God informed them in advance. But from here on the poem gives words of consolation, and Rashi compares them to the words in Nitzavim:

When all these things befall you—the blessing and the curse that I have set before you— ...  
then Adonai will restore your fortunes and take you back in love. [Deut. 30:1–2]

Finally the poem comes back to praise the power of God.

<sup>39</sup> See, then, that I, I am He;  
There is no god beside Me.  
I deal death and give life;  
I wounded and I will heal:  
None can deliver from My hand.

...  
<sup>43</sup> O nations, acclaim His people!  
For He'll avenge the blood of His servants,  
Wreak vengeance on His foes,  
And cleanse the land of His people.

Reading these words so soon after Yom Kippur, we cannot miss their echo in U-n'taneh Tokef: Ha'azinu says, "I deal death and give life." U-n'taneh Tokef says, "Who shall live and who shall die..." Ha'azinu says, "Adonai will vindicate His people." U-n'taneh Tokef says, "T'shuvah, T'fillah and Tz'dakah can transform the harshness of our destiny."

Does Ha'azinu explain why bad things happen? Perhaps not for us. But it makes a strong statement that there is justice in the world, that both good and ill are integral parts of life, and that justice will prevail in the end. And these concepts have helped to sustain the Jewish people through the centuries.

Shabbat Shalom.