

In the form of a poem or song, Parashat Ha'azinu emphasizes a major theme of *D'vorim* (*Deuteronomy*), that of reward or punishment if Israel is, respectively, observant of or rebellious toward God's commands. The poetry is beautiful but often unclear, lending itself to multiple interpretations. As such, it provides many examples of what Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz had in mind when he wrote the following [St, Introduction, ix] in the introduction to the *Steinsaltz Chumash*:

... a huge number of commentaries have been composed over ... the past three thousand years by the greatest people in our history. Who has the audacity to attempt to join this holy assembly or even grasp its coattails?

Sanction for undertaking this daunting task can be found in Rashi's statement to his grandson Rashbam, himself the author of an important commentary on the Torah. Rashbam reports Rashi to have said that if he had had the strength, he would have written another commentary in accordance with "the plain meanings that are renewed every day" (Rashbam, Gen. 38:2).

Or, as Rabbi Rosenbaum and others have taught us, "Torah has 70 facets," i.e., a verse may have multiple valid interpretations.

Rabbi Yissocher Frand, citing Rabbi Isaac HaLevi Herzog (Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi of Israel, 1936 – 1959), asked why the major part of Ha'azinu is called, in several verses of last week's reading, a song.

[Fr]: Rav Herzog [said]: With virtually all fields of study in the world, one uninitiated in that discipline gets no pleasure from hearing a theory or an insight concerning that field of study. For example — physics. If one tells over to a physicist a "chiddush" in his field of expertise, he will get great pleasure from it. If, however, one shares this same insight with someone who has never studied and never been interested in physics, he will be totally unmoved by it. The same applies to many, many other disciplines.

However, this is not the case with music. When Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is played — regardless of whether one is a concert master or a plain simple person — there is something one will get out of it. Music is something that everyone on their own level can enjoy and have a relationship to.

Rav Herzog says, that's why Torah is called "Shirah". One can be a great Talmid Chochom and learn "Bereishis Barah Elokim..." and see great wisdom therein. On the other hand, one can be a five year old child, just beginning to read, and learn "Bereishis Barah Elokim..." and also gain something from it. Every person, on his own level can have an appreciation for Torah. Therefore Torah is aptly referred to in the verse when it says [Deut. 31:19 – *Etz Hayim*, p. 1177] "And now, write for yourselves this 'song'..."

So. Our opening verse:

32:1 (*Etz Hayim*, p. 1185): Give ear, O heavens, let me speak; Let the earth hear the words I utter!

Rashi [Ra, p. 286] asks, "... why did he call to witness against them heaven and earth?" and answers:

Moses said: I am of flesh and blood; tomorrow I die. If the Israelites will say: We have not taken upon ourselves the covenant, who will come and contradict them? Therefore he called to witness against them heaven and earth – witnesses that exist forever.

*Etz Hayim*, p. 1000, verse 2: The prophet Isaiah said something similar, but with the ear/hear and heavens/earth associations reversed:

Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth....

Why the reversed associations?

[MT]: Moses said: GIVE EAR, O HEAVENS, and Isaiah said: HEAR, O HEAVENS. R. Aqiva said: <This> teaches that when Moses uttered the Torah, he was in the heavens, and that he speaks with the heavens like one who is speaking with his friend.... But when he saw that the earth was far from him, he said: LET THE EARTH HEAR THE WORDS OF MY MOUTH. In the case of Isaiah, however, because he was on earth, he said: HEAR, O HEAVENS, [since they were] far from him. After that he said: AND GIVE EAR, O EARTH, because it was near to him.

I believe it is appropriate to interpret this as support for Maimonides' principle that Moses was the greatest of the prophets, since Isaiah was surely one of the greatest.

32:2: May my discourse come down as the rain, My speech distill as the dew,  
Like showers on young growth, Like droplets on the grass.

[MT] The Rabbis see the reference to dew as a blessing, noting that dew is among the blessings Isaac gave both to Jacob (*Etz Hayim*, p. 157, v. 28) and Esau (*Etz Hayim*, p. 159, v.7), and that dew accompanies the fall of manna (*Etz Hayim*, p. 416, v. 14).

The *Steinsaltz Humash* renders this verse as

My lesson will fall as the rain, My saying will flow like dew,  
Like rainstorms on grass, And like raindrops on vegetation.

Rabbi Steinsaltz [St, p. 1128] comments:

The lesson refers to harsh words containing elements of rebuke, which will bombard the people like torrential rain, while the mild sayings will fall upon them gently, like dew.

32:7: Remember the days of old, Consider the years of ages past;  
Ask your father - he will inform you; Your elders – they will tell you.

Rashi [R, p. 290] says “your father” refers to the prophets, called “fathers,” as Elisha referred to his mentor, Elijah, as “my father, my father.” Note also that the Tanach makes note of the “Sons of the Prophets,” who in most cases were not biological sons, but disciples. And “your elders,” says Rashi, are the wise men who will recount your history.

Rabbi Steinsaltz [St, p. 1130] adds: “This song ... is not addressed only to the people standing before Moses, but to all generations. Moses ... stresses: In the distant future, when some of these matters will have been forgotten, ask your parents and your elders to recount them for you.”

[Fr] Rabbi Frand, citing Menachem Zion, writes the following. Note his concern with the word *shnot* (*shnos*), translated as “years” but perhaps meaning “changes” or “differences”:

This pasuk, even on a very simple and basic level is telling us that a person has to have an appreciation for history.... On a simple level, Binu Shnos Dor V'Dor (Understand each and every generation) is redundant. It would appear to be a poetic restatement of the beginning of the verse. On a homiletic level however, the Menachem Zion offers a very nice interpretation of this expression.

Yes, one must understand history and take the lessons of history and apply it to our generation, but also Binu 'Shnos' dor v'dor. He homiletically says the word 'Shnos' is derived not from the word 'Shana' (year) but from the word 'Shoneh' (different). The meaning is that you must understand the changes from one generation to the next.... Each generation is different.... Binu Shnos Dor V'dor — take the lesson of history, but bear in mind the changes from generation to generation. Times change, people change, and circumstances change. Sometimes a person has to alter and redirect and not merely go with what was.

The latter lesson has certainly been forced upon us during the current pandemic.

#### References

[Fr] Rabbi Yissocher Frand, “Listen to the Music!”, <https://torah.org/torah-portion/ravfrand-5755-haazinu/>

[MT] Midrash Tanchuma, quoted at

<https://www.sefaria.org/Deuteronomy.32.1?lang=en&with=Midrash%20Tanchuma%20Buber&lang2=en>

[Ra] Rashi: Rabbi Abraham Ben Isaiah and Rabbi Benjamin Sharfman, eds., *The Pentateuch and Rashi's Commentary: Deuteronomy*, S.S.&R Publishing, Brooklyn, 1949

[St] Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, ed. and commentator, *The Steinsaltz Humash*, Koren Publishers, Jerusalem, 2018