

From Song to Song — The Story of Our People

A D'var Torah on *Parashat Ha'azinu* (Deut. 32:1–52)

By Alan I. Friedman

“Ha'azinu hashmayim va'adabeirah; v'tishma ha'arets imrey-fi.”
“Listen, heavens, and I will speak. Earth, hear the words of my mouth.”

Parashat Ha'azinu, the penultimate parashah of Deuteronomy, brings us to the end of Moses' life. We have witnessed Moses as an adopted son of a royal family, a fugitive, a visionary shepherd, a reluctant leader, a lawgiver, and a teacher. And over the course of the Torah's five books, we have seen Moses evolve from a thick-of-tongue stutterer to a respected orator and poet laureate.

Much like *Shirat Ha-Yam*,¹ sung by Moses, Miriam, and the Israelites to praise God for enabling them to escape the pursuing Egyptian chariots and safely cross the Sea of Reeds, *Ha'azinu* takes the form of a poem or a song. Why a poem? In contrast to prose, “the language of poetry penetrates the emotions. It forces us to feel and understand with deep, sometimes unbearable, intensity”² and allows us to express or explore hidden nuances of the message.

From song to song — the story of the Jewish people begins with a song of triumph as we close the chapter of our slavery and begin the chapter of our freedom as God's chosen people. The story ends (in the Torah, at least) with the final chapter of Moses' life and the opening chapter of our new life in the Promised Land.

But *Parashat Ha'azinu* does not end on the eastern shore of the Jordan River. Through his poetic eulogy of Jewish history, Moses shares his vision of Jewish experiences for centuries to come. In fact, he expresses this prophetic vision in the past tense, as though he is looking backward from some future time.

The message of *Ha'azinu* is cast in complex metaphors and beautiful imagery, delivered in a poetic stream of consciousness with great urgency in the last hours of Moses' life.³ The people are about to begin an entirely new phase of their existence — in the absence of the only human leader they have ever known. Moses has only this final chance to guide his flock. How can he instill a sense of divine awe in them? How can he reinforce the

¹ Exodus 15:1-19

² Commentary on *Parashat Ha'azinu* by Alicia Ostricker; *The Jerusalem Report*; October 5, 1995.

³ Commentary on *Parashat Ha'azinu* by Chaim Lauer, Executive Vice-President of the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York; *Tora Aura*; September, 2001.

messages of God and Torah? For without this sense and understanding, the people cannot survive.⁴

Being a great teacher, Moses uses different strategies to impress the people with the importance of their covenantal obligations. He reviews their history, their Exodus experience, and the Revelation at Sinai. And he describes in excruciating detail what will befall them if they do not follow God's commandments. Using vivid imagery in his song of warning and hope, Moses urges the Israelites to remember the past and learn from their mistakes.⁵

Why does Moses find it necessary to chastise the people as they stand ready to enter the Promised Land? Although Moses knows that the people are physically strong, he questions their spiritual well-being. He recognizes that not all Israel is comfortable with its status as a sacred and unique people. He observes those among them who already are tired of the burden of following God's commandments, too willing to repudiate their mission to be a covenantal people, too ready to escape from freedom.⁶

Moses begins his song by calling on heaven and earth to witness not only the eternal validity of his words, but also the covenant-affirming choice that Israel must make. This is not the first time that heaven and earth have served as Moses' witnesses. Why are such special witnesses needed, Rashi asks. By way of an answer, he has Moses saying to himself, "I am mortal; I am destined to die. If Israel claims that they did not accept the covenant, who will refute that claim?" Therefore, says Rashi, Moses appoints heaven and earth to be witnesses — witnesses that exist forever, witnesses that will be called upon to testify at some future time.⁷

The Ohr Hachaim⁸ elaborates: Though the origin of one's soul is in heaven, the soul extends to one's body here on earth. Moses' words originated at the source of his soul, in heaven, yet could be heard on earth as they issued from his mouth. Thus Moses called on *both* heaven and earth to hear his words.

Ha'azinu is both a recapitulation of Jewish history and a prophesy of events that will take place once the people have entered the Promised Land. Lacing his words with not-so-subtle reminders of the people's past transgressions,

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ "How Can Modern Jews Follow the Path Moses Prescribed?" by Julie Harris, Director of Hebrew and Judaica, Mid-Peninsula Jewish Community Day School, Palo Alto, California; *Torat Hayim*; 1998.

⁶ Commentary on *Parashat Ha'azinu* by David Elcott, Ph.D., Director of U.S. Interreligious Affairs, American Jewish Committee; September, 1999.

⁷ "Torah and Song, Heaven and Earth," by Rav Amnon Bazak; Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash; 2004.

⁸ Rabbi Chaim ben Mosheh ben Atar, 1696-1743, known by the name of his most famous work, *Ohr HaChaim*.

Moses focuses on the weaknesses of the people and the perfection of God. If the people sin and are ungrateful to God for the many favors that God bestows upon them, they will be punished; but if they remain loyal to God and Torah, they will receive the greatest blessings.⁹ To experience God's power and love, and God's undying promise of divine deliverance, Israel must embrace Torah as life-giving and essential.¹⁰

Through Moses, God expresses frustration. God has explained the rules; God has executed the covenant; God has warned the people of the punishments for transgressions. And even though God knows that, following Moses' death, the people will be corrupted, God recognizes that personal experience is a more potent teacher than rote explanation.¹¹ Through experience, the people will learn that they have strayed, and — with this song on their lips — they will repent. God will take them back and redeem them.

When redemption comes, heaven and earth will not be the only witnesses. This song, itself, is to be a witness.¹² The song will actively accompany Israel throughout its history. Even during the years of sin and exile, the song will remain engraved on the people's subconscious. At the appropriate time, however, the song will burst forth and penetrate Israel's collective consciousness.¹³ The song waits, therefore, for the time when, in the people's fullness of despair, it will be transformed from a prophesy into a witness.

The essential message of *Ha'azinu* is this: "Jewish practice is life itself. Take it to heart, teach it to your children, and live your life accordingly. Jewish observance and faith are the keys to life's rewards."¹⁴ And even though we stray, God will not abandon us. Even though we transgress, God will forgive. As long as we remember the song, God guarantees our survival and ultimate redemption.

⁹ Summary of *Parashat Ha'Azinu*, by the Editors of Torah From Dixie.

¹⁰ "Border Crossings," by Rabbi David Stern, Temple Emanu-El, Dallas Texas; Torat Hayim; 1997.

¹¹ Commentary on *Parashat Ha'azinu* by Rav Ezra Bick; Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash; 1997.

¹² "Adonai said to Moses ... write this song for yourselves, and teach it to the people of Israel; place it in their mouths so that this song may be My witness...." (Deuteronomy 31:16-19).

¹³ Rav Amnon Bazak; *op. cit.*

¹⁴ "Calling for Justice," by Deena Bloomstone, Director of Education, Temple Beth El, San Antonio, Texas; Torat Hayim; 1997.